

Third Party Heartland: A Study by the 2004 Elections Project

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Introduction

As the 2004 election season heats up, the attention of journalists and political observers is focused on the contests between the two major political parties. Missed is the persistent strength of third parties in recent state and national elections in Minnesota, Wisconsin, Iowa, and South Dakota. Third parties are winning some races and, more often, determining whether or by how much the Republican or Democrat wins. The Upper Midwest is becoming the heartland of third parties.

This July, the Humphrey Survey of voters in the Upper Midwest demonstrated that both President George W. Bush and Senator John Kerry are hurt by the Libertarian Party candidate Michael Badnarik and, especially, by Independent Ralph Nader.

The current showing of third party candidates in the 2004 presidential election in the Upper Midwest reflects a longstanding presence in the region, with their greatest activity centered in Minnesota, Wisconsin, and Iowa. Third party candidates received significant support in recent elections for U.S. president, governor, and state and national legislatures. The Independence Party and Green Party have most consistently run credible campaigns. The Libertarian Party also has made headway within the region, as have candidates who have run without a party by petitioning to get on the ballot.

Third party candidates are starting to shake up the electoral map that has been carved up by Democrats and Republicans. Jesse Ventura's victory in the 1998 race for governor of Minnesota was the biggest earthquake. In a number of races, though, votes for third party candidates ate into the safety of incumbents by cutting their margins of victory (at times dramatically). For instance, Independence Party candidates for the Minnesota State Senate drained votes from incumbent Democrats during the 2002 elections, dramatically tightening the race with GOP candidates and edging Republicans closer to overcoming the DFL's slight four-seat majority. In still other races, third party candidates clearly targeted the major political party closest to their views. In races where one of the major party candidates was not being contested by a Democrat or Republican, third parties jumped in to the race to send a message to the political establishment and build credibility with voters.

Third Parties Thrive in the Grassroots of State Politics

State House: In 2002, third party candidates won a minimum of two percent of the vote (and often quite a bit more) in races for the state House in all four states. Minnesota recorded the largest number of races in which third party candidates ran credible campaigns: 42 of the state's 134 House races (31 percent) included a third party challenger. Third party candidates were notably active in 13 of Wisconsin's 99-seat Assembly races (13 percent), followed by seven of Iowa's 100-seat House contests (7 percent), and two of South Dakota's 36 House races (6 percent).

Upper Midwestern Third Party Candidates In State House Elections, 2002 *

State	%	Candidates / Races
Iowa	7.0	7 / 100
Minnesota	31.3	42 / 134
South Dakota	5.6	2 / 36
Wisconsin	13.1	13 / 99
Total	17.3	64 / 369

* Indicates the percentage of races in which a third party candidate received at least 2.0% of the vote.

In Minnesota, more than a dozen of the credible third party candidates broke into double digits; five candidates garnered more votes than the winner's margin of victory, possibly tipping the outcome. In District 44a in St. Louis Park, Republican Jim Rhodes won by 1.8 percent of the vote over the DFL candidate Betty Folliard after Green Party candidate Keith J. Meland drew 4.3 percent of the vote.

The most striking feature of third party activity in Wisconsin's House races is the prevalence of the Libertarian Party, which nominated seven of the 13 credible third party candidates in 2002. The strong showing by the Libertarian candidates coincided with the striking 10.5 percent won by the Libertarian candidate for governor, Ed Thompson, in 2002.

The Libertarian Party also was quite active in Iowa, where it nominated three of the state's seven active third party candidates. Independent candidate David Galbraith drew 4.7 percent of the vote in the 39 th District race as Republican Dell Hanson won by less than eight percent. Not surprisingly, the largest vote totals for third parties occurred in races where one of the major parties did not nominate a candidate. An open question is whether these races will provide a foothold for stronger showings in future races or whether they are fleeting results.

Although the number of races in which third party candidates got traction in South Dakota is not large, these campaigns did attract significant support. In the hotly contested five-candidate race for two seats in the 4 th District, Independent candidate Larry Rudebusch won 4.8 percent and may well have drained votes from one of the major party candidates vying for the second seat. In the 26 th District, Independent Lowden Heller hauled in an impressive 18.9 percent as two Republicans (Kent Juhnke and Cooper Garnos) won the dual member District.

State Senate: Third party candidates broke the two percent threshold (often by considerable margins) in races for the State Senate in all four states in the Upper Midwest. Third parties were most active in Minnesota, where third party candidates ran credible campaigns in 21 of the state's 67 races (31 percent). Nine of Iowa's 35 races (26 percent) saw notable third party candidacies, with one each in Wisconsin (one of 17 districts) and South Dakota (one of 35 Districts).

Upper Midwestern Third Party Candidates In State Senate Elections, 2002 *

State	%	Candidates / Races
Iowa	25.7	9 / 35
Minnesota	31.3	21 / 67
South Dakota	2.9	1 / 35
Wisconsin	5.9	1 / 17
Total	20.8	32 / 154
* Indicates the percentage of races in which a third party candidate received at least 2.0% of the vote.		

In Minnesota, third party candidates may be the king makers in determining whether DFLers or Republicans control the State Senate. After the 2002 election, the DFL clung to a four-vote majority in the wake of redistricting that shifted some longtime incumbents. In this closely fought battle, five Independence Party candidates won more votes than the Democrat's margin of victory or won the seat outright (as in the case of District 30 where Sheila Kiscaden, who held the seat in 2000, bolted the GOP for the Independence Party in 2002). In District 63, DFL incumbent Jane Ranum saw her nearly 35-point landslide in 2000 against a sole opponent (Republican Marc Sullivan) sliced in more than half to 14 points when the Independence Party's Edwina Garcia grabbed 17.4 percent of the vote in 2002. (Nearly all of Independent Garcia's votes came from the DFL's Ranum, whose vote total fell from 67.3 percent to 48.3 percent.)

The Independence Party inflicted similar damage in District 47 when its candidate (Mark Temke) scored 14.6 percent in 2002 and shrank the DFL's winning margin to six points (45.7 for Leo Foley versus 39.7 for Ray Egan) from 27.8 points in 2000 (63.9 for Linda Scheid's versus 36.1 for Walt Filson). In addition, the DFL's majority leader (John Hottinger) only narrowly won by three points over Republican Julie Strom in the redesigned District 23 after the Green Party's Mark Frieman grabbed 2.9 percent of the vote and the Independence Party's Matt Kruse took 5.4 percent. The success of the Green Party and, especially, the Independence Party, moved Republicans within striking distance of seizing the majority in the Minnesota Senate. If third parties fail to launch vigorous campaigns in the next election in 2006, Republicans will find it more difficult to pick up seats and win a majority.

Impact of Independence Party Candidates on DFL Incumbent In 2002 Minnesota State Senate Elections

District	% Independence Party (2002)	% DFL (2000)	% DFL (2002)	Change in DFL Victory Margin
63	17.4	67.3	48.3	- 21.0
47	14.6	63.9	45.7	- 21.8
23*	5.4	59.5	47.3	- 16.0

* Incumbent John Hottinger represented District 24 before 2002 redistricting.

In Iowa, third party candidates may well have affected the contests of two of the state's 35 races for the Senate by garnering more votes than the winner's margin of victory and either creating a tight race or perhaps tipping it to one of the candidates. Independent Neal R. Gorham won 7.8 percent in District 28, more than Republican James Seymour's 5.6 percent win over Democrat Lenee Sinnott. Similarly, Independent Brad L. Nordstrom won 4.4 percent in District 37, more than Republican Doug Shull's 2.2 percent win over Democrat Bill Fink. Another striking feature of the Iowa Senate races is that Libertarian candidates ran credible campaigns in four of the State's nine races where third parties got traction.

In Wisconsin and South Dakota, third party candidates won substantial vote totals when only one of the major parties ran a candidate. What is particularly interesting, though, is that the third party challenge came from third parties that were most philosophically compatible. In South Dakota, Libertarian Gwendolyn Caldwell won 20.7 percent in South Dakota's 30th District against Republican Drue J. Vitter. Although a Democrat might seem more susceptible to a challenge from a Libertarian candidate, Caldwell showed that some voters preferred her to her Republican opponent. Wisconsin offers the opposite scenario: the Green Party's Jim Carpenter won 20.3 percent of the vote in a race against Democrat George L. Christenson. These races suggest that third parties are challenging the major parties that most overlap with their philosophical orientation; the sense of philosophical betrayal may be prompting these challenges.

Governor: Third parties have had their greatest impact in the races for governor in Minnesota and Wisconsin. Jesse Ventura's defeat of the two major party candidates in 1998 stands out as the high water mark in third party politics in the Upper Midwest. The 37 percent of the vote that Ventura won as an Independence Party candidate far exceeded the most successful previous third party candidate for governor in Minnesota (Independent J. Miles received 4.8 percent of the vote in 1974). Ventura's victory laid the groundwork for recruiting one of the state's prominent politicians, former Congressman Tim Penny, to run as the Independence Party candidate for governor in 2002. Penny's campaign received an impressive 16 percent of the vote, one of the highest vote totals for a third party candidate in statewide elections over the past four decades; only Ventura's 1998 and Perot's 1992 campaigns surpassed it. Indeed, Penny may well have finished even stronger if the tragic death of Paul Wellstone had not interrupted the final days of the campaign; until the plane crash, Penny had run neck-and-neck with Democrat Roger Moe and future governor Republican Tim Pawlenty.

In Wisconsin, Ed Thompson's Libertarian candidacy won 10.5 percent, exceeding Democrat Jim Doyle's narrow 3.7 percent win over Republican Scott McCallum and breaking a string of

four consecutive Republican victories. Thompson's Libertarian candidacy probably made the difference in Doyle's win by drawing more conservative voters.

Third Parties Contest National Elections

U.S. House: Third party candidates have consistently done well in congressional elections in the Upper Midwest over the past four decades. Since 1960, third party candidates have most often met (and often considerably exceeded) two percent threshold in Minnesota (38 of 177 races, 21 percent) followed by Wisconsin (15 of 203 races, seven percent), South Dakota (three of 33 races, nine percent), and Iowa (four of 133 seats, three percent). In the 2002 election, third party candidates were quite active in Minnesota and Wisconsin and, to lesser extent, in Iowa. In five of the eight races in Minnesota and Wisconsin, third party candidates easily cleared two percent of the vote.

Upper Midwestern Third Party Candidates In U.S. House Elections, 1960-2002 *

State	%	Candidates / Races
Iowa	3.0	4 / 133
Minnesota	21.5	38 / 177
South Dakota	9.1	3 / 33
Wisconsin	7.4	15 / 203
Total	11.0	60 / 546
* Indicates the percentage of races in which a third party candidate received at least 2.0% of the vote.		
Source: Data compiled from Clerk of the U.S. House of Representatives.		

In Minnesota during the 2002 campaign, two candidates won seven percent or more and three other candidates won about four percent. This success in 2002 was foreshadowed in the two previous elections for Congress: third parties succeeded in breaking the two percent threshold (often by a significant margin) in elections for six of Minnesota's eight seats in 1998 and 2000. In 2000, Independence Party candidate Tom Foley won 21 percent in the 4 th Congressional District against DFL candidate Betty McCollum (48 percent) and Republican Linda Runbeck (31 percent). The Green, Independence, Constitution, and Libertarian parties were most successful in these contests.

In Wisconsin, the Green Party's Brian Verdin won 13 percent in the race for the 4 th Congressional District in 2002 where Democrat Gerald D. Kleczka faced no Republican rival; Independent Robert Raymond harvested 13.3 percent of the vote in the 5 th District's contest against longtime Republican leader James Sensenbrenner who ran unopposed by a Democrat. Two Libertarian candidates drew just over two percent in lopsided wins by one of the major parties (Republican Paul Ryan's 30-plus point win in the 1 st District and Democrat Ron Kind's similar washout of his Republican rival Bill Arndt in the 3 rd District.) In Iowa, Libertarian Kevin Litten received two percent in Republican James A. Leach's six-point win over Democrat Julie Thomas in the 2 nd Congressional District.

U.S. Senate: Third party candidates have enjoyed persistent success in U.S. Senate elections in the Upper Midwest over the past four decades. Since 1960, third party candidates have most often met (and often considerably exceeded) the two percent level in Minnesota (seven of 16 races, 44 percent), South Dakota (two of 15 races, 13 percent), and Wisconsin (one of 14 races). Iowa has had no third party candidate garner two percent of the vote in a U.S. Senate race.

Upper Midwestern Third Party Candidates In U.S. Senate Elections, 1960-2002 *

State	%	Candidates / Races
Iowa	0.0	0 / 15
Minnesota	43.8	7 / 16
South Dakota	13.3	2 / 15
Wisconsin	7.1	1 / 14
Total	16.7	10 / 60

* Indicates the percentage of races in which a third party candidate received at least 2.0% of the vote.

Source: Data compiled from Clerk of the U.S. House of Representatives.

Only three races for the U.S. Senate were held in 2002; they followed historical patterns. In Minnesota's 2002 U.S. Senate race, the Independence Party's Jim Moore won two percent in Republican Norm Coleman's narrow 2.2-point win over Walter Mondale who replaced Senator Paul Wellstone on the ballot after his tragic death. The Independence Party and its predecessor (the Reform Party) have now run credible campaigns in the four consecutive Senate elections (1994, 1996, 2000, and 2002). Campaigns by James Gibson in 2000 and Dean Barkley in 1994 and 1996 reaped five percent or more of the vote and received more votes than the winning candidate's margin of victory in two races (2000 and 1994). Most notably, Gibson received 5.8 percent in 2000 when Democrat Mark Dayton defeated Republican Rod Grams by 5.5 percent. No third party candidate got traction in the successful bids for reelection by Iowa's Tom Harkin and South Dakota's Tim Johnson.

Presidential Elections: In the last three elections, the major third party candidates all enjoyed unusual success in the Upper Midwest. Minnesotan voters were most receptive. In Ross Perot's 1992 campaign, he received 18.9 percent nationally; in the Upper Midwest, he got the votes of nearly one-quarter of Minnesotans (24 percent), more than one-fifth of South Dakotans (21.8 percent) and Wisconsinites (21.5 percent), and Iowans gave him slightly less than the nation as a whole (18.7 percent). Perot's national total of 8.4 percent in 1996 was exceeded (in proportional term) in Minnesota (11.8), Wisconsin (10.4 percent), and South Dakota (9.7 percent); Iowa followed the national pattern (8.5 percent).

Upper Midwestern Third Party Candidates In U.S. Presidential Elections, 1992-2002 *

State	%	Candidates / Races
Iowa	100.0	3 / 3
Minnesota	100.0	3 / 3
South Dakota	66.7	2 / 3
Wisconsin	100.0	3 / 3
Total	91.7	11 / 12

* Indicates the percentage of races in which a third party candidate received at least 2.0% of the vote.

Source: Data compiled from Clerk of the U.S. House of Representatives.

In 2002, Ralph Nader won 2.7 percent nationally but more in Minnesota (5.2 percent) and Wisconsin (3.6 percent) and just under the national average in Iowa (2.2 percent). Nader failed to reach the two percent mark in South Dakota.

The showing of third parties in the past three presidential races has been a significant factor in the closeness and perhaps the outcome of the contests in the Upper Midwest. In nearly every race, the votes won by Perot and Nader exceeded the margin of victory by the presidential candidate who won the state. A significant third party campaign in the 2004 presidential elections could well determine whether President Bush wins the region.

The Third Party Heartland

Third parties have consistently succeeded in appealing to voters in the Upper Midwest. Jesse Ventura's victory in Minnesota's 1998 gubernatorial election is demonstrable proof of this appeal.

The principle challenge facing third parties is whether they will be able to consistently match Ventura's impact by winning elections or whether their primary impact will be as a spoiler or potential threat to Democrats and Republicans. In some races, third party candidates probably have tilted the outcome (as in Wisconsin's 2002 governor's race). More often, third parties have produced 'near misses' by tightening races between Democrats and Republicans (as in recent presidential elections).

Upper Midwest voters are now familiar with third party candidates and many seem comfortable casting their ballot irrespective of whether it benefits one of the major two parties. The question is whether third parties will be victors or spoilers in the 2004 elections. In either case, they seemed poised to influence the outcome – again.