

# **The Ventura Legacy: Solidified and Stronger Third Parties**

A Study by the 2006 Elections Project  
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June 2006

Jesse Ventura ran in the 1998 governor's election as a rebel intent on breaking the hold of the two-party system on government. Yet critics charge that Governor Ventura failed to convert his personal following into a lasting legacy of third party strength in Minnesota. Doug Grow blasted Ventura in a June 2002 *Star Tribune* column for "blowing a huge opportunity" and "giving almost nothing back" to the Independence Party, while Jim Ragsdale predicted in a July 2002 *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel* story that Ventura's legacy "won't endure" in part because "party building" was not a priority. (Full disclosure: Lawrence Jacobs voiced similar doubts.)

The conventional wisdom is wrong or, at a minimum, requires a significant revision. Ventura's successful campaign for governor in 1998 solidified and strengthened third parties in state and national elections in Minnesota. Although Ventura benefited from the history of third party success in Minnesota, his election campaign for governor expanded the number of state and national elections in which third party candidates won a significant number of votes.

Ventura's legacy to third party politics was not limited to his own Independence Party. Although Independence candidates rode on his coattails, Ventura's forceful stand for loosening the hold of the Democratic and Republican parties on Minnesota politics benefited other third parties including the Green Party, Constitution Party, Libertarian Party and others.

*The strengthening of third parties under Ventura had an impact on the balance of power in Minnesota government. Third Party candidates defeated Democrats and Republicans and won elections. Even when not winning, they tipped several elections by drawing voters from one of the major parties. In a closely divided electorate, the success of third party candidates can determine which of the two major parties holds the reins of government. The persistent success of third party candidates and Ventura's contribution to boosting and sustaining them may well impact the Governor's race (where Independence Party candidate Peter Hutchinson has launched an energetic campaign) and legislative contests.*

## **Third Party Success in State Elections After Ventura's Campaign:**

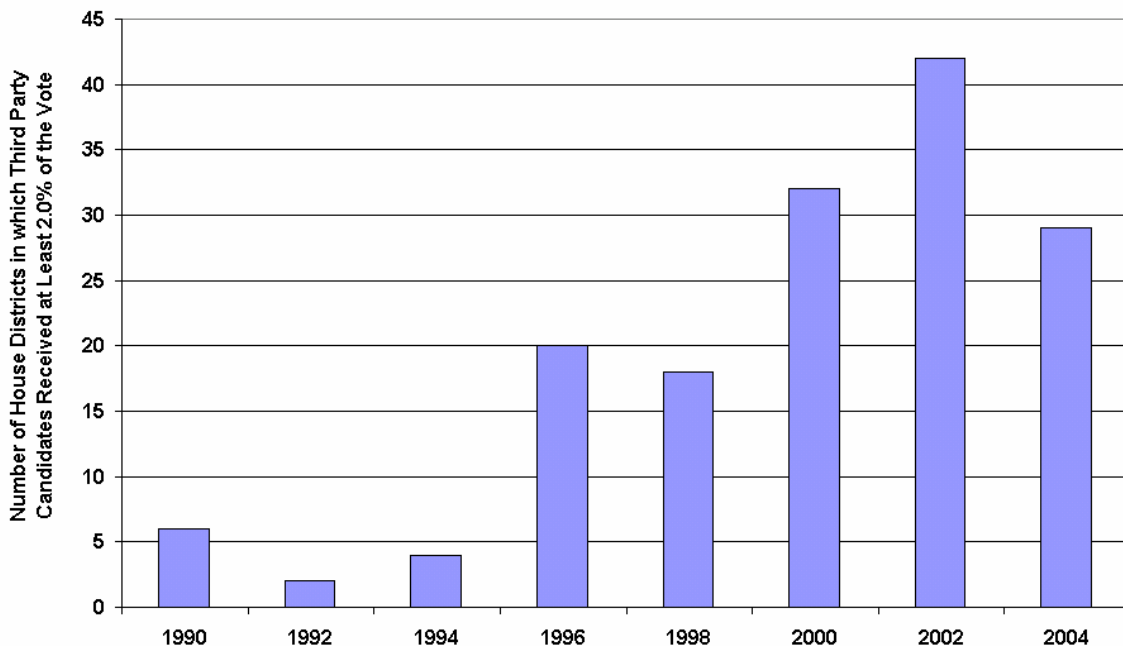
**State House:** In the early 1990s, there were only a handful of candidates that broke the stranglehold of the two major parties; that number rose in 1996 in the wake of Ross Perot's successful campaigns.

Ventura’s election boosted and sustained third party success in races for the state House. Specifically, the number of elections to the 134-seat Minnesota House in which third party candidates won at least 2 percent of the vote doubled from 1996 (20 seats – the strongest showing during the early 1990s) to 2002 (42 seats). It declined in 2004 but still exceeded the 1996 level (29 seats), two years after his departure from office.

The persistent showing of third party candidates makes a difference, possibly tipping the outcome in several races. In 2002, the number of votes received by more than a dozen of the third party candidates broke into double digits with five candidates garnering more votes than the winner’s margin of victory. In District 44a in St. Louis Park, Republican Jim Rhodes won by 1.8 percent of the vote over DFL candidate Betty Folliard, after the Green Party’s Keith J. Meland drew 4.3 percent.

In 2004, votes for third parties equaled or exceeded the margin of victory in four state house races (Districts 12a, 23a, 26b and 40a). In District 23a, Independence Party candidate Lance A. Bennett won 4.3 percent of the vote, greater than DFL Ruth Johnson’s 3.6-point margin of victory over Republican Howard Swenson. A similar story unfolded in District 26b in which Mike Corbin of the Independence Party won 4.5 percent, less than a 2-point margin of victory by the DFL’s Patty Fritz over Lynda Boudreau of the GOP.

**Significant Third Party Showings in Minnesota State House Elections, 1990-2004 (134 Districts)**

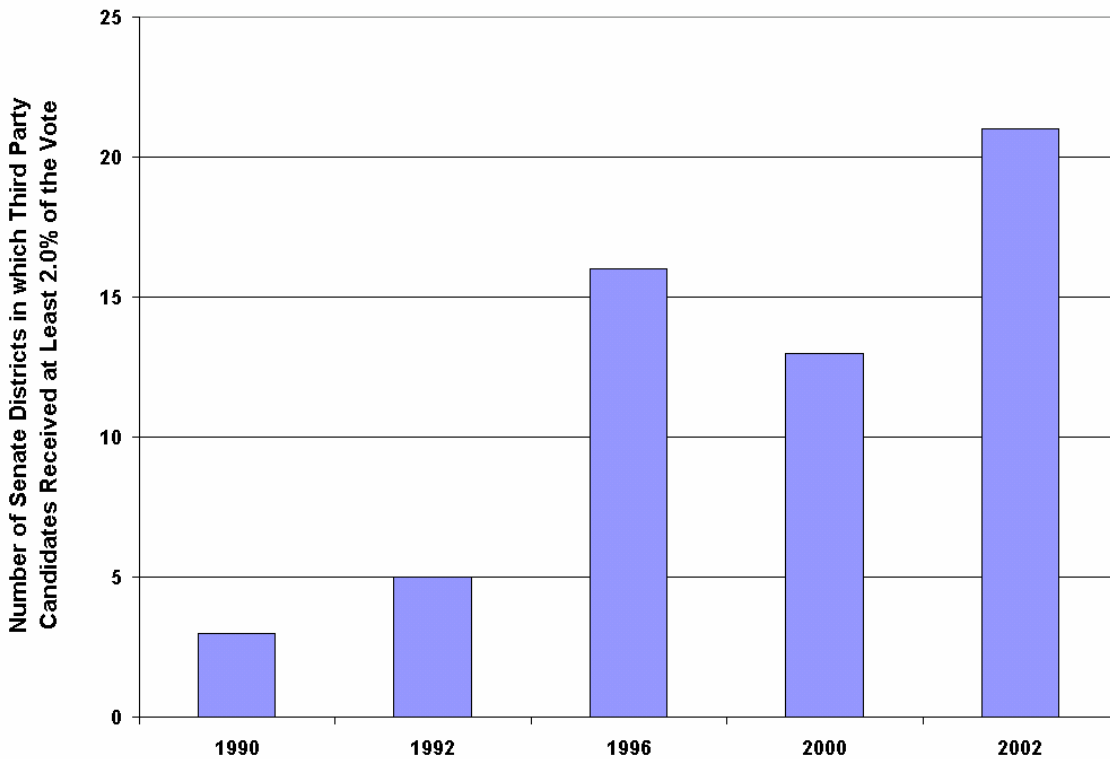


Ventura’s election opened the door to strong showings by several third parties. Independence Party candidates enjoyed the greatest success, though Green Party candidates also took off in the wake of Ventura’s election – with 21 candidates notching

at least 2 percent of the vote in 2002 and 2004, including two showings of greater than 20 percent each.

**State Senate:** Ventura also generated votes for third party candidates for the Minnesota Senate. The number of elections to the 67-seat Minnesota Senate in which third party candidates won at least 2 percent of the vote rose from 16 seats in 1996 (the high point during the early 1990s) to 21 seats in 2002. (There were no elections for the Minnesota Senate in 2004.) In addition, the number of candidates from third parties that won at least 2 percent (often more) in the Minnesota Senate reached a new high after Ventura's victory, with Independence Party candidates especially successful in riding his coattails and Green Party candidates also benefiting.

**Significant Third Party Showings in Minnesota State Senate Elections, 1990-2002 (67 Districts)**

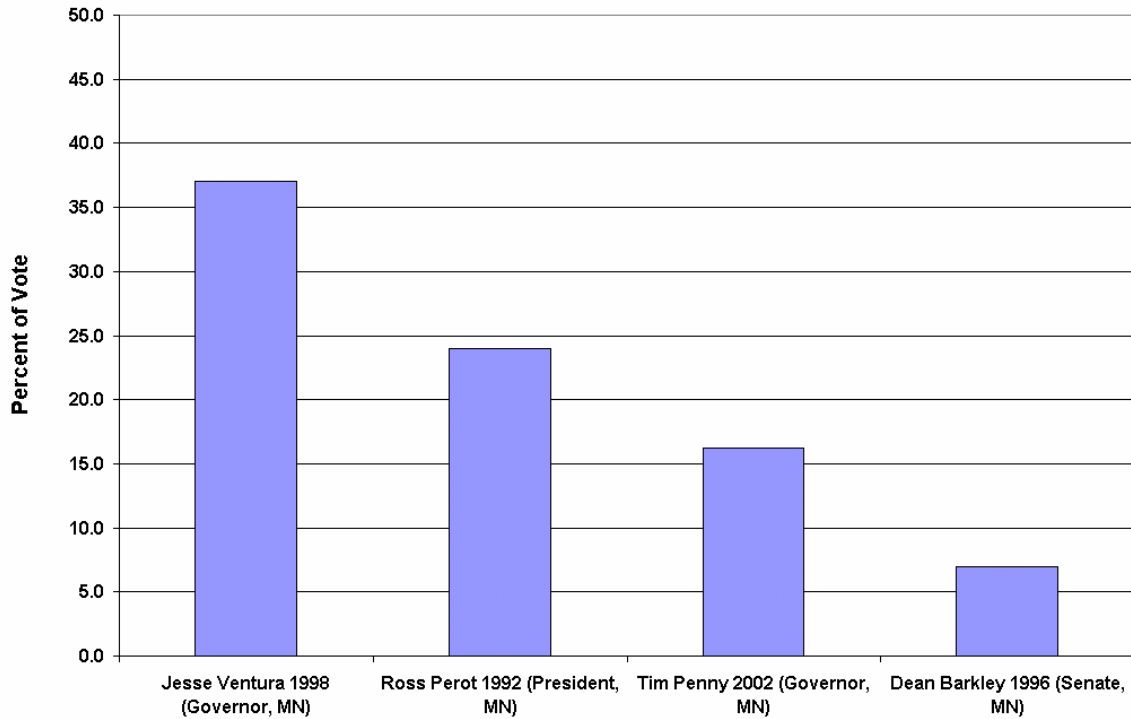


The success of the Green Party, and especially the Independence Party, moved Republicans within striking distance of seizing the majority in the Minnesota Senate. After the 2002 election, the DFL clung to a four-vote majority in the wake of redistricting that shifted some longtime incumbents. In the closely fought battle for control of the state Senate, five Independence Party candidates won more votes than the Democratic 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, reduced by more than half to 14 points when the Independence Party's Edwina Garcia grabbed 17.4 percent in 2002.

(Nearly all of the votes for the Independence Party's Garcia came from Ranum, of the DFL, 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 6 points (45.7 for Leo Foley versus 39.7 for Ray Egan) from 27.8 points in 2000 (63.9 for Linda Scheid versus 36.1 for Walt Filson). In addition, former DFL majority leader John Hottinger only narrowly won by 3 points over Republican Julie Strom in the redesigned District 23 after the Green Party's Mark Frieman grabbed 2.9 percent and the Independence Party's Matt Kruse took 5.4 percent.

**Governor:** 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 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 16 percent, the third highest vote total for a third party candidate in Minnesota statewide elections over the past four decades; only Ventura's 1998 and Perot's 1992 campaigns surpassed it. (Penny ended up finishing third behind Democrat Roger Moe's 36.5 percent and Republican Tim Pawlenty's 44.4 percent.) Will Independence Party candidate Peter Hutchinson score similarly well with voters?

**Most Successful Third Party Campaigns in Minnesota State-Wide Elections, 1960-2002**



## **Ventura Impact on Third Party Races for National Elections:**

**U.S. House:** Ventura's biggest impact on national elections within Minnesota was felt in races for the U.S. House of Representatives. In the nearly four decades before Ventura's 1998 campaign, 1 or 2 third party candidates occasionally received 2 percent or more of the vote. The 1992 election marked a significant change, with third party candidates winning significant support in 6 of the Minnesota's 8 House races. (Independent candidate Dean Barkley won 16 percent in the 6<sup>th</sup> Congressional District.) After the 1992 spike, however, the number of congressional districts with third party candidates registering significant support fell to 2 in 1994 and then 4 in 1996.

Ventura's 1998 campaign produced the longest stretch of third party success in congressional elections. In the 1998, 2000, and 2002 elections, third parties (particularly the Green Party and Independence Party) succeeded in breaking the 2 percent threshold (often by a significant margin) in elections for 5 or 6 of Minnesota's 8 seats. In 2000, Independence Party candidate Tom Foley won 21 percent in the 4<sup>th</sup> Congressional District against Democrat Betty McCollum (48 percent) and Republican Linda Runbeck (31) percent. In 2004, four third party candidates eclipsed 3 percent of the vote, with Peter F. Vento's Independence Party bid in the 4<sup>th</sup> District leading the pace at 9.2 percent.

**US Senate:** Ventura contributed to keeping third parties a consistent force in U.S. Senate races during the 1990s. Beginning in 1994, the Reform Party and its successor, the Independence Party, nominated four candidates that scored 2 percent or more in four consecutive elections – Dean Barkley in 1994 and 1996 and James Gibson and Jim Moore in 2000 and 2002, respectively. The campaigns by Gibson and Barkley reaped 5 percent or more votes 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. Although third parties were active in Senate races before 1998, Ventura helped to sustain them as a significant force in U.S. Senate elections.

## **Will The Ventura Legacy Last:**

Jesse Ventura encouraged and strengthened third parties in Minnesota politics. Ross Perot's presidential campaigns and Dean Barkley's gubernatorial races won significant support in Minnesota; Ventura built on their success and extended it. Beginning with his 1998 campaign for governor, Ventura expanded the number of third party candidates that won sizeable number of votes, especially in legislative races.

The critical question is the durability of Ventura's legacy. Will third parties continue to be a presence in Minnesota politics, or will they fall back to their previous position of marginal significance? The elections in 2002 and 2004 offered early signs that Ventura's legacy has some staying power.

Will that impact continue to be felt in 2006? Hutchinson's candidacy and the energy of the Independence and Green parties indicate that the Democratic and Republican parties will

continue to be aggressively challenged and that voters will give third party candidates a close and serious look.