

THE RISE (AND FALL) OF THIRD PARTIES

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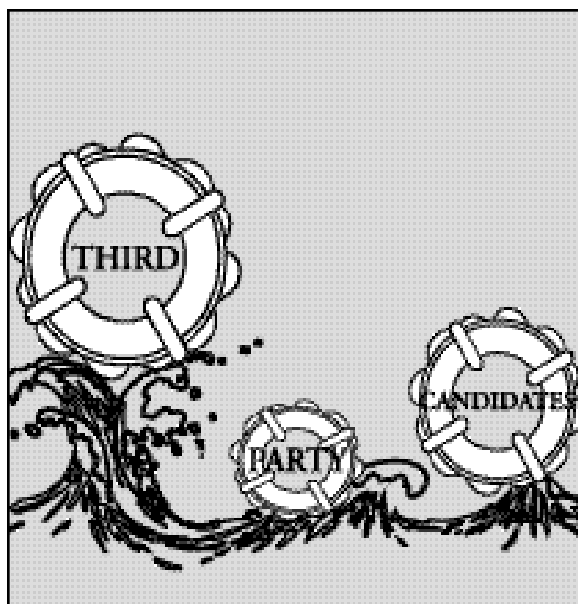
How many times has this happened before?

Third parties rattle the cages of the major parties, flirt with double-digits in the polls, tantalizing activists and pundits alike with visions of political upheavals and gridlock — only to fade at the end.

This November's election will likely be a repeat, with the minor parties reduced again to mere asterisks. As unsurprising as that might seem, it wasn't supposed to be that way this year.

Consider:

- * Despite fading in 1996, Ross Perot's Reform Party deprived Bill Clinton of a majority of the popular vote in two presidential elections, winning enough of the vote to qualify for federal campaign money.
- * Throughout the 1990s, polls had shown growing dissatisfaction with major parties. Independents like Angus King in Maine and Jesse "The Body" Ventura in Minnesota seemed to presage new possibilities for third party candidates to actually win major contests. (In Wisconsin, we



started electing third party governors nearly a century ago.)

* Trends in technology media seem to create fertile ground for minor parties. Alternative media have broken the network monopoly on political information, while the rise of the Internet dramatically expanded the opportunities for activists to spread their message, communicate

with one another, and organize grass-roots movements.

- * And finally, changing demographics seem to open the door to insurgent parties, as voters outgrew traditional loyalties to established parties.

In the long run, all of this may fuel powerful third party movements. But for the time being, the minor parties are still the lint traps of American politics, where all the leftover crotchets and weird fur-balls of ideological extremism seem to settle.

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Closing Ranks

None of this is to suggest that the minor candidates — Pat Buchanan and Ralph Nader — haven't been entertaining and haven't had an impact on the race.

On the right, Buchanan has come close to a political hat trick: he's not only helped fuel the rise of Ralph Nader; he's helped the GOP rid itself of the wacko lock-'n-load militia wannabe Right; and effectively cratered Ross Perot's Reform Party.

The finger pointing, name-calling, pushing, and shoving at the Reform Party convention improbably made Perot himself look like a model of stability. As for Buchanan, the one-time Republican gadfly's support has dwindled to the almost pure crack factor, the kind of guys who stock up pork and beans in their basement against the day when the Bilderbergers and the Trilateralists make their Big Move.

Unfortunately, this isn't an election that will turn on that sort of paranoia. People with fat 401(k)'s tend not to obsess about the machinations of the New World Order or black helicopters.

Third party candidates thrive in times of division and disillusionment with the established political parties. Some of the notable third party bids (John Anderson in 1980 for instance) reflected the weaknesses of one or the other major party.

But this year, voters seem strikingly uninterested. Prosperity is a poor incubator for disgruntlement. Beyond that, voters seem to sense that the election is close and the stakes high and many are reluctant to waste their vote on a statement of principle or protest. This would not matter if there were a single driving issue motivating an outsider challenger. But the most powerful constituencies on both the left and the right seem relatively satisfied with the choices offered by the two major parties.

Even so, Buchanan might have been a factor had pro-lifers felt excluded from the Republican Party (they don't); Nader could

have posed a more credible threat if anti-free trade activists had been energized to abandon Gore. But despite his role as cheer leader for NAFTA, Gore has quickly shelved his free trade credentials, and organized labor has decided that winning the election trumps its own lingering discontents. While his sharp turn to the left at the Democratic Convention may ultimately weaken his appeal to political moderates, Gore's decision to reinvent himself (again), as a pitchfork populist seems likely to weaken the Nader appeal.

There's a lesson here somewhere.

The Third Way

Historically third parties have had an impact in one of three ways: (1) If they are led by strong, charismatic leaders with a large following, such as Teddy Roosevelt, Robert La Follette, or even Perot; (2) if they represent regional insurgencies — Strom Thurmond in 1948 and George Wallace in 1968; or (3) if they articulate a set of clear, jealously guarded principles (ala the Progressives, Socialists, or more recently the Libertarians.). Although they never posed any risk of actually winning anything at the national level, Socialist Norman Thomas and Wisconsin's own Bob LaFollette exerted a strong pull on the left wing of the Democratic party. In particular, LaFollette's progressivism helped shape the New Deal. Despite their own endemic fractiousness, the Libertarians may be the closest to that model, developing a political/intellectual network that includes a steady stream of books, newsletters, and think-tanks that push free market perspectives.

But this was a process that takes place over decades, not merely during the convulsive herky-jerky of quadrennial elections. In 1992, Ross Perot won nearly one in five votes, but never managed to create any sort of organization or movement that could build on that showing. Perot's candidacy was largely about Perot; if there was an issue, it was the need to balance the budget and reform campaigns. But campaign finance has never been the hot button issue the media imagines, and the booming economy erased the deficit.

Without Perot himself, the Reform Party had neither personality nor principle.

In many ways, Perot's party was like him — strange and a bit paranoid. Actually, the Reform Party was never so much a movement as a magnet for the permanently disgruntled and crotchety. It attracted people accustomed to the politics of annoyance at a high decibel level, given to writing letters to the editor with lots of words capitalized and a generous supply of exclamation points. Unfortunately, it was never all that clear what they were annoyed about.

Perot was quirky and driven enough to give some focus to all of that angst, but he also ensured that his party wouldn't survive.

A role model for control-freaks everywhere, Perot made sure the "volunteers" would never develop a movement of their own. Instead of building on his national success, Perot's almost constant purging of the state parties tended to leave the party in the hands of the crankiest and most eccentric members.

Ultimately, though, the Reform Party was ruined by the fat wad of federal money. The \$12.5 million turned the party into a political spoil. In the absence of a core set of principles, the Reform Party was like an abandoned car with the keys in the ignition and a tank full of gas. Inevitably, it attracted the wrong elements — from Marxists like Lenora Fulani, to "Natural Law Party" guru John Hagelin. The result was the Reform Party convention's descent from farce to slapstick comedy, to litigation and the rise of the Greens as the most credible third party on the ballot.

Few minor parties can resist the nostalgia for irrelevance — the freedom from responsibility that allows them to indulge in endless nit-picks over ideology, personalities, and pro-

cedures that major parties with an actual shot at winning elections are forced to eschew. At the Reform convention we got a glimpse of the minor parties at their absolute worst, a scene all the more riveting for having a certain sense of inevitability about it. What else, after all, could be expected of a party that had spent the spring variously flirting and fantasizing about running Donald Trump, John McCain, Jesse Ventura, Perot, and dozen or so political mouth-breathers for president?

Fire On The Left

The decline of Perot's party also means that for the first time since 1948, the top third party candidate will be from the left.

"You're seeing Nader bumper stickers already," State Representative Mark Pocan (D-Madison) told the Associated Press in Los Angeles during the Democrat's convention. Pocan openly worried that the Gore campaign wasn't taking Nader's candidacy seriously enough. "I'm always afraid when they don't pay enough attention to the Nader factor."

The Green party nominee is expected to be on the ballot in 45 states; and prior to the Democratic convention, polls put his support at around 6 percent, not enough to be included in the Fall debates, but enough to put in doubt some states that ought to be safely in Gore's column. The scariest prospect for the Democratic nominee is California, where Nader is at 8 percent in the polls, enough to raise the prospect of throwing the biggest electoral prize of all into the Bush column.

Nader has both ideas and a constituency. Permanently ruffled and a so-so (at best) stump speaker, Nader is making a strong run at voters who think the Democrats have become a corporatized mirror image of the Republicans. Nader has the added advantage

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of being very much a known quantity, a fixture on the public stage for more than three decades. Even though he's a bit strange (he doesn't like supporters to applaud, because it distracts him) and a whole lot wonkier than even Al Gore (he sometimes speaks for three hours straight at campaign rallies), he's not a scary guy.

For Nader to actually sway the election, though, he probably needs to reach out beyond his current core constituencies. When David Brooks of the *Weekly Standard* interviewed Nader, the candidate insisted that conservatives ought to support him because the greatest threat to conservative values comes not from Marxist revolution, but from nihilistic corporations and the commercialization of American life.

But when David Brooks attended a Nader 2000 rally in Minnesota, he didn't find many conservatives. Or even moderates. Or liberals.

Instead, he writes, "The place was awash with Spartacus Youth, vegans, white suburban Rastafarians, proud lesbians, 'Free Leonard Peltier' activists, no-growth crusaders, Saddam sympathizers, public transit militants, Castro groupies, bearded cabinet-making communards, and IMF-loathing anarchists with pierced cheeks."

This may be a cross-section of the electorate in certain wards on the west side of Madison, but it not a portrait of the swing voters who will decide the 2000 election.

Even so, it's possible to argue that fear of Nader might have influenced Gore's new left-leaning persona; just as fear of a pro-life third party challenge guaranteed that the GOP would not abandon a pro-life platform. That of course would be in the best traditions of third-party politics.

Unfortunately, this year we're likely to see much more of the worst.