

The Third Party Impact in 2008

Report prepared by the Center for the Study of Politics and Governance

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Third parties may determine the outcome of the 2008 presidential contest between the presumptive Democratic and Republican Party candidates, Senator Barack Obama and Senator John McCain. Elections in statewide races around the country indicate significant potential support for runs by Libertarian nominee Bob Barr, Ralph Nader, or possibly other candidates.

Voter support for a Barr or Nader third party run would re-shuffle the carefully hatched plans of the Democratic and Republican parties.

Three of the last 4 presidential elections were impacted by third party campaigns. Green Party candidate Ralph Nader tilted the 2000 election from the Democratic to Republican parties by drawing 97,488 votes in the Florida contest that was decided by 537 votes. Ross Perot influenced the outcome of the 1996 and, especially, the 1992 races. Although Libertarian presidential candidates have not received more than 0.5 percent of the vote since 1980, they have placed their candidate's name on every presidential ballot since 1972, and have achieved ballot access in at least 36 states in every year since 1980. The Party has won enough votes in statewide races to contribute to the defeat of many Republicans (e.g. Democrat Jim Doyle's 2002 Wisconsin Gubernatorial win and Democrat Tim Johnson's 2002 South Dakota U.S. Senate victory). Third party candidates have also recently won statewide races for U.S. Senate (Connecticut's Joe Lieberman and Vermont's Bernie Sanders in 2006) and governor (Minnesota's Jesse Ventura and Maine's Angus King in 1998).

Careful review of recent presidential and statewide elections reveals two central findings that may provide the key to the 2008 presidential race:

- Third party candidates have enjoyed persistent success in gubernatorial and U.S. Senate elections since the 1990s. These results may be leading indicators of voter inclination to vote for a third party presidential candidate.

- Third party candidates may impact the Obama-McCain contest by shaping the debate and, more dramatically, by playing King Maker by capitalizing on third party successes in as many as 28 state-wide races in 2006.

Persistent Success of Third Parties in Gubernatorial and U.S. Senate Elections

The most striking omen for the 2008 presidential election comes from the persistent success of third party candidates to attract voters in recent gubernatorial and Senate races. Insurgent candidacies regularly draw interest and play the role of King Maker by drawing enough support to swing the election.

Third party candidates played King Maker in 10 gubernatorial races from 1998 to 2006 by winning more votes than the margin of victory (or winning the election outright) and drawing away sufficient numbers of major party supporters to swing the election. This kind of “Nadering” has afflicted both Democratic and Republican candidates and may haunt Obama and McCain.

Third Party Performance in Gubernatorial Elections, 1998-2006

Year	Number of States	Races in which 3 rd Party Vote 2% or More	Races in which 3rd Party Vote Greater than Winning Margin	Races in which 3 rd Party Played King Maker ¹
1998	36	53% (19)	8% (3)	6% (2) ²
2000	11	45% (5)	18% (2)	0% (0)
2002	36	69% (25)	33% (12)	17% (6)
2004	11	45% (5)	9% (1)	9% (1)
2006	36	58% (21)	17% (6)	3% (1)
Total	130	58% (75)	18% (24)	8% (10)

Note: number of races in parentheses.

¹ A third party is defined as a ‘King Maker’ when it receives more votes than the margin of victory and the losing major party was ideologically related to the King Maker (e.g. Libertarian/Republican; Green/Democrat).

² Includes gubernatorial victories by third party candidates Jesse Ventura and Angus King in 1998.

Here are some real-live examples of Democrats and Republicans getting “Nadered” in recent gubernatorial elections: In the 2002 gubernatorial election in Oregon, Republican Kevin Mannix lost by less than 3 points to Democrat Ted Kulongoski while Libertarian candidate Tom Cox received nearly 5 percent of the vote. In Minnesota’s 2006 gubernatorial race, Republican incumbent Tim Pawlenty nipped Democratic challenger by 1 point while left of center Independence Party candidate Peter Hutchinson received more than 6 percent of the vote. The backdrop here is that third party candidates are alive and well: 58% of gubernatorial elections from 1998 to 2006 included total votes for third parties of at least 2 percent. They are waiting in the wings to ambush the 2008 presidential contest.

In U.S. Senate races, third party candidates played King Maker in 7 races from 1998 to 2006. For instance, Washington State Democrat Maria Cantwell eked out a 2,229-vote victory over Republican incumbent Senator Slade Gorton in 2000 as Libertarian Jeff Jared siphoned off nearly 65,000 votes. A Republican incumbent was similarly burned by a Libertarian in

Montana’s 2006 U.S. Senate: Democratic challenger Jon Tester upended Republican Conrad Burns by 3,562 votes as the Libertarian Stan Jones won over 10,000 votes.

A closer look at third party candidates reveals that their success extends beyond high-profile Naderings. Third parties in fifty-five percent of U.S. Senate of elections from 1998 to 2006 cumulatively won at least 2 percent of the vote. The reality is that they are a persistent presence.

Third Party Performance in U.S. Senate Elections, 1998-2006

Year	Number of States	Races in which 3 rd Party Vote 2% or More	Races in which 3rd Party Vote Greater than Winning Margin	Races in which 3 rd Party Played King Maker ¹
1998	34	59% (20)	6% (2)	3% (1)
2000	34	68% (23)	9% (3)	6% (2)
2002	34	44% (15)	9% (3)	3% (1)
2004	34	56% (19)	6% (2)	0% (0)
2006	33	48% (16)	15% (5)	9% (3) ²
Total	169	55% (93)	9% (15)	4% (7)

Note: number of races in parentheses.

¹ A third party is defined as a ‘King Maker’ when it receives more votes than the margin of victory and the losing major party was ideologically related to the King Maker (e.g. Libertarian/Republican; Green/Democrat).

² Includes U.S. Senate victories by third party candidates Joseph Lieberman and Bernie Sanders in 2006.

In sum, third parties played King Maker in 17 gubernatorial and Senate contests since 1998. Will Bob Barr or Ralph Nader play King Maker in November?

How Third Parties May Impact the Obama-McCain Contest in 2008

Third party candidates may “Nader” Obama or McCain by capitalizing on their voter support in 2006. In 10 states, third party candidates won more votes in the 2006 gubernatorial and senate contests than the winning margin by either George Bush or John Kerry in 2004. Five of these states were quite competitive in the 2004 presidential elections – Wisconsin, Iowa, Nevada, Minnesota, and Oregon.

Votes for Third Parties in 2006 that Exceeded Winning Margin in 2004 Presidential Race

State	2004 Presidential Election			2006 Gubernatorial & US Senate Elections	
	2004 Bush Votes	2004 Kerry Votes	Difference between Bush and Kerry	2006 3 rd Party Total	Office
Wisconsin	49.3	49.7	0.4	3.3, 2.0	Senate, Governor
Iowa	49.9	49.2	0.7	1.5	Governor
Nevada	50.5	47.9	2.6	8.2, 3.6	Governor, Senate ¹
Minnesota	47.6	51.1	3.5	7.6, 4.0	Governor, Senate
Oregon	47.2	51.4	4.2	6.5	Governor
Maine	44.6	53.6	9.0	31.7	Governor
Connecticut	44.0	54.3	10.3	50.7	Senate
Illinois	44.5	54.8	10.3	11.0	Governor
Vermont	38.8	58.9	20.1	67.7	Senate
Texas	61.1	38.2	22.9	31.2	Governor

¹ Data includes 3.6 percent of the Nevada electorate who voted for “none of these candidates” in the 2006 Gubernatorial election and 1.4 percent in the 2006 Senatorial election.

There are another 15 states that deserve particular attention for third party impact. In 15 of the 21 states where Bush and Kerry were locked in relatively close races decided by 10 points or less, a potent third party challenger in the 2008 presidential election could tip the outcome even though insurgent candidates fizzled in the 2006 statewide races. Seven states stand out in particular as the most vulnerable to third party Nadering: New Mexico, New Hampshire, Michigan, Colorado, Florida, Missouri, and Virginia.

States Where Potential Third Party Challenges Could Impact Battleground States

State	2004 Presidential Election			2006 Gubernatorial & US Senate Elections	
	2004 Bush Votes	2004 Kerry Votes	Difference between Bush and Kerry	2006 3 rd Party Total	Office
New Mexico	49.8	49.1	0.7	0.1, 0.0	Senate, Governor
New Hampshire	48.9	50.2	1.3	0.2	Governor
Ohio	50.8	48.7	2.1	0.0, 0.0	Senate, Governor
Pennsylvania	48.4	50.9	2.5	0.1, 0.1	Senate, Governor
Michigan	47.8	51.2	3.4	1.8, 1.3	Senate, Governor
Colorado	51.7	47.0	4.7	2.9	Governor
Florida	52.1	47.1	5.0	2.7, 1.6	Governor, Senate
New Jersey	46.2	52.9	6.7	2.3	Senate
Missouri	53.3	46.1	7.2	3.1	Senate
Washington	45.6	52.8	7.2	3.3	Senate
Delaware	45.8	53.4	7.6	1.1	Senate
Hawaii	45.3	54.0	8.7	2.1, 1.9	Governor, Senate
Virginia	53.7	45.5	8.2	1.2	Senate
Arkansas	54.3	44.6	9.7	3.7	Governor
California	44.4	54.3	9.9	5.6, 5.2	Senate, Governor

The Threat to the Republican Party

After the 2000 election in which Nader's vote grab in Florida upended Gore's candidacy, third parties have often been considered an affliction for Democrats. Not true. Third parties also spell trouble for Republican candidates. Democrat Jim Doyle broke a string of four straight Republican wins for governor in Wisconsin by a 45 to 41 percent margin in 2002 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 former Secretary of Health and Human Services, Tommy Thompson), took a whopping 11 percent, hurting the GOP most.

In the 2002 South Dakota U.S. Senate election, the 3,070 votes for Libertarian candidate Kurt Evans were enough to upend Republican John Thune's effort to beat Democrat Tim Johnson. When it became apparent that Evans might tip the race to Johnson, the Libertarian actually dropped out of the race in mid-October 2002 and endorsed Thune, stating, "I've suspended my campaign and endorsed John Thune in the race for the U.S. Senate. I've always had more agreements than disagreements with Congressman Thune on the issues." Nonetheless, Johnson prevailed thanks to lingering statewide support for Evans.

The Libertarian Party is a significant threat to the Republican Party in 2008. Presumptive Republican Party nominee John McCain has faced strident criticism from small government and low tax advocates. In addition, prominent social conservative leaders have publicly discussed supporting a third party candidate.

The threat of a third party challenge is real. Ron Paul's steady 5% to 10% support in the Republican nomination contests and impressive online fund raising tapped into fervent frustration with the growth of government (and foreign policy entanglements) among the GOP faithful. Paul ran as the Libertarian Party's 1988 presidential candidate; the Libertarian Party recently praised him "for all he had done for liberty in his (2008) presidential bid." Bob Barr, who won the Libertarian Party nomination in May, is now working hard to draw these Ron Paul supporters.

In 7 gubernatorial and U.S. Senate races in 2006, 2 percent or more of voters cast their ballots for the Libertarian Party, which has picked up the banner of small government. Similar vote totals by a Libertarian presidential candidate could be enough to flip the race to Obama in several states by draining away voters who would otherwise end up casting their ballot for McCain. Some polling already shows Barr drawing support in certain states (like his home state of Georgia) that diminishes McCain's vote share.

Here is the decisive question that needs to be asked about the Republican general election campaign: Will voters for Independent or Libertarian candidates in the 2006 elections coalesce behind one candidate in the 2008 presidential race? Recent elections provide evidence that frustration with Republican leaders for abandoning Ronald Reagan's commitment to small government and social conservative planks may well hurt McCain.

The Democratic Party has its own Achilles heel. The bruising battle between Hillary Clinton and Barak Obama may give rise to "protest voters" who decide to support Nader as they did in large numbers in 2000.