

Third-party threat: It's not just Nader

By Lawrence R. Jacobs

ST. PAUL, MINN. - The hot topic in handicapping the presidential election is whether independent candidate Ralph Nader will be the spoiler - again - by winning a small but decisive percentage of the vote in an evenly divided country.

But Mr. Nader is not the only third party candidate who could sway the electorate significantly enough to change history - as he did in 2000 by siphoning off liberal voters from Al Gore and as Ross Perot did in 1992 and 1996 by taking conservative votes from the GOP candidate.

A Humphrey Institute Survey found in February that 20 percent of voters are disaffected from the two major parties, and a significant number of them could be tapped by gifted candidates running as independent or Libertarian - if these candidates received the kind of press attention that Nader has attracted.

While Nader hurts the presumed Democratic nominee John Kerry, voters open to conservative third-party candidates who promote small government and criticize ballooning government budget deficits pose a significant threat to President Bush's reelection effort. Pundits have ignored the importance of the third-party swing vote, but the White House has not, working hard to head off damaging defections.

Indeed, these small-government conservatives who are disenchanted with the major parties made a real mark in the 2002 elections: 2 percent or more of voters in 15 gubernatorial and US Senate elections in 2002 cast their ballots for the Libertarian Party. And candidates running as independents cleared the 2 percent mark in seven other states. Numbers like these could be a decisive factor in a close contest between Messrs. Bush and Kerry.

Third-party candidates will have their greatest impact in critical battleground states in this year's presidential election.

While recent successes of the Green Party in New Mexico, Oregon, and elsewhere dominate political talk of Nader as a Kerry spoiler, far less attention has been devoted to the potential of Libertarian and independent successes to drain conservative votes from Bush in swing states. In Wisconsin, where Bush narrowly lost in 2000, the Libertarian candidate in the 2002 gubernatorial context took an impressive 10.5 percent, enough to help Democrat Jim Doyle break the four-term Republican hold on the state house. In Nevada, where the president prevailed by just 3 percent in 2000, the Libertarian and two candidates running as independents took a total of 4 percent of the vote in the 2002 gubernatorial race. Bush took New Hampshire by about 1 percent in 2000 - but

votes for Libertarian candidates in the 2002 gubernatorial and US Senate races there totaled more. And in Missouri, another battleground state expected to be narrowly decided in November, the Libertarian candidate's 1 percent in the 2002 US Senate race nearly upended Republican Jim Talent's razor-close win over Democrat Jean Carnahan. In Ohio, the US Senate candidate for the Natural Law Party took 4 percent in 2002. Minnesota's unusually strong support for Ross Perot's campaigns in the 1990s and its election of Jesse Ventura as governor in 1998 far surpass Nader's showings there.

These recent elections demonstrate an overlooked but potentially decisive reservoir of support for third-party candidates who run on a small-government platform.

Third-party candidates pose quite different threats to Kerry and Bush, according to the Humphrey Institute's February poll conducted by the University of Connecticut. Bush perhaps has the most to lose in the third-party trend because a conservative third party would erode his GOP base of support. Meanwhile, the threat to Kerry is less to his Democratic base than to the critical base of independent voters who might otherwise swing toward him in the absence of a third-party candidate.

The poll showed that in a one-on-one race with Kerry, Bush would win 87 percent of the GOP vote. But when given the option of Bush, Kerry, and a conservative third-party candidate, GOP support for Bush dropped to as low as 75 percent.

Surprisingly, the poll found that in a Kerry-Bush-Nader race, Kerry lost relatively few votes among Democrats - he'd win 72.8 percent of Democrats in a two-man race and 70 percent of the Democrats when Nader was in the race.

In a three-way race, the poll found Nader damaged Kerry most among independent voters. In a two-candidate race against Bush, Kerry enjoyed an eight-point lead among independents. But he came in slightly behind Bush among independents when those voters were offered Nader as a third choice. Even the mention of a generic third-party candidate sapped Kerry's support among independents by about 19 points; it depressed Bush's share by just 12 points.

The support of voters for third-party candidates from across the political spectrum raises three challenges for pollsters, journalists, and other critical players in the presidential election.

First, pollsters who fail to offer voters the opportunity to indicate support for conservative third-party candidates run the risk of missing the dynamics of the race and providing an inaccurate picture of the evolving campaign.

Second, the press should expand its coverage to encompass the campaigns of potentially influential third-party candidates besides Nader to state ballots is a telling issue that the press has yet to investigate seriously. Nader was able to get on only 43 state ballots in 2000 and is struggling again this year to qualify on all state ballots. But by contrast, the Libertarian Party successfully placed its 2000 presidential candidate on the

ballots of every state and is likely to have its candidate on many more state ballots than Nader will this year. And, if there's a question in the media - and within the Presidential Debate Commission - about whether Nader should be included in the debates, then the Libertarian nominee most certainly should be considered, too.

Third, conventional assumptions about the electorate as polarized Republican and Democratic camps misses the trend of the last three presidential elections - third-party candidates are tipping the outcome of presidential elections.

Expect the 2004 election outcome to be scrambled by liberal and conservative third-party candidates.

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