He's back! Ralph Nader, political destroyer extraordinaire, is set to run for the presidency again as a third party candidate. Democrats are alternately stunned and outraged while Republicans are privately ecstatic. The rest of us seem not sure what to think about it all.

The intense interest in a putative Nader candidacy is rooted in the still heavy overhang of the 2000 presidential race between George Bush and Al Gore. That election came down to Florida's electoral votes, and many believe that Nader's candidacy cost Gore Florida and less well known but New Hampshire as well.

This belief in turn leads Democrats to fear and Republicans to hope for a reprise of Election 2000. For Democrats, Nader looks like a disaster in progress and for Republicans, an election year gift from the gods.

But is this view realistic? Is Nader a factor in 2004? Might the 2004 election be determined by his candidacy? Will Nader really matter?

Both historical and political analysis argues that he will not. Historical factors in particular raise serious doubts that a Nader 2004 candidacy will be consequential.

In fact, the history of American third parties suggests Nader is unlikely to be more than an asterisk on Election Day; however, much he might have mattered in 2000. In historical terms the election of 2000 and Nader's role in it were historical flukes, the equivalent of a hundred year flood, and unlikely to re-occur anytime soon.

Some brief facts about American third parties: writers generally distinguish two main types:

- Third Parties with short life, but substantial appeal. These include parties like the Populist Party (William Jennings Bryan), the American Independent Party (George Wallace) and the Patriot Party (Ross Perot). Short life, high appeal third parties might last only an election or two, but garner significant voter support during that brief period.
- Third parties with long life, but narrow appeal. These include parties, such as the Libertarian Party and the Socialist Party. This type of party might last for decades or longer, but never receive significant voter support. Nader's 2000 party, the Green Party, is an example of latter type.

Overall, short life, wide appeal third parties tend to make a big splash, but have little lasting effect on the political system. The Perot candidacy in 1992 provides a good case in point. Perot helped shape the major party contest between George H. W. Bush and Bill Clinton--especially in forcing the national deficit into the presidential debate--and engendered enormous attention and interest. Today, however, he is largely forgotten and his party is moribund.

Conversely, long life, narrow appeal parties are obscure to most voters, but often have enduring influence on programs and policy. Third parties first proposed a large proportion of modern political reforms, such as the direct election of US Senators, and initiative, referendum and recall, as well as many of the New Deal and Great Society social welfare programs, including social security and Medicare.
Overall third parties have found little electoral success in presidential elections. They have never won a presidential election and only infrequently even figure in their outcome. Just 13 times in American history have third party candidates received 5% or more of the vote. And only once--the Bull Moose Party in 1912--has a third party even come close to winning. And it took a former president, Theodore Roosevelt, as the third party candidate for that to happen.

One of the most reliable patterns in third party candidates is the tendency to lose support, as Election Day gets closer. Their popularity tends to peak early in the campaign and then declines. Typically a third party candidates highest voter support is found in late spring or summer of the election year, and then declines by 50-percent.

Independent candidate John Anderson in 1980, for example, ended up with 7-percent of the vote after polling as high as 15-percent in summer polls. The fall off in voter support apparently occurs when many supporters conclude the third party candidate can't win, and abandon them for a major party candidate.

Perot's remarkable popular vote showing in 1992 (19-percent of the popular vote) was in fact because of his unique success in convincing supporters that he "could win." And who knows what might have happened had Perot not taken himself out of the Presidential race in early summer 1992, after accusing the Republicans of sabotaging his daughter's wedding, and then re-entered the contest for the fall campaign. He actually led both Bill Clinton and George Bush at the time he initially left the race.

Political analysis of the Nader candidacy itself supports the historical evidence that third party candidates never win and rarely matter in the outcome of presidential contests.

It must be acknowledged that Nader's influence on the 2000 election is controversial. Many believe he took enough votes away from Gore in Florida and New Hampshire to elect Bush. Others, including Nader himself, dispute this contention.

His actual vote total in Florida was almost 97,000 votes out of almost six million cast, and Bush beat Gore by some 500 votes. So it is plausible that absent Nader from the Florida ballot, George Bush would still be governor of Texas. But plausible is about the best we can ever do with this point. We can only speculate what Nader's supporters might have done if he wasn't on the ballot. Some would have voted for Gore, but others for Bush and some would not have voted at all.

There is some respected research, for example, that concludes third party candidates in general draw heavily from independent voters, with about equal support coming from Republican and Democrat voters.

But in the case of Nader and the 2000 election--we can never know for sure. And since we don't know for sure we cannot therefore talk about Nader doing again in 2004 what he did in 2000--since the evidence is inconclusive that he was decisive in 2000. The same close vote in key swing states would be required for Nader to even be considered a factor, something history bets against.

And Nader's support in 2004 is likely to be substantially less then 2000. On average third party candidates running a second time receive about 50-percent of the support they had running the first time. Nader's national
2000 vote was just under 3-percent and so in 2004 his likely support on Election Day could be under 2-percent. And that's assuming he is on the ballot in most or all-50 states, and that's not certain at the moment.

One final piece of political analysis. Contributing to the possibility of a worse showing for Nader in 2004 is the unusual unity now found within the Democratic Party. In 2000, some progressive Democrats were alienated from the Clinton presidency, meaning they resented the center drift of his administration and his embattled impeachment years. They were ripe for a Nader candidacy. But this year the desire to whip President Bush has brought electability to the fore as the driving force in the Democratic nomination process.

The bottom line: Nader in 2004 gets fewer votes in 2004 than in 2000, and importantly he will not influence the course of the campaign. He's here now, but soon to be forgotten, or call it Nader's nadir.

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