Third Party Follies
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In America’s "two party system," Republicans and Democrats, aka, the major parties, usually don’t appreciate
the so-called third parties, aka, the minor parties. About as popular as a skunk at a summer picnic, third parties
as a group are viewed by the majors as impudent upstarts, somewhat unsavory, and unwanted potential
adversaries.

The majors’ typical response to third parties is to ignore them, disparage their right to be on the ballot, and
even actively work to keep them off the ballot. That is why the recent high profile efforts of the Santorum US
Senate campaign to provide financial and staff support to the Green Party has raised so many political
eyebrows. To say the least, it is unusual to have a major party become the number one contributor to a third
party candidate.

But we are getting a little ahead of ourselves. First a dash of political ba
ckground on America’s third parties: historically there have been two main types of third parties. Type One have been parties that hang around a
long time, but mostly bob about under the national radar screen. Good examples are contemporary third parties
like the Libertarians and the Greens. Type Two third parties live in the fast lane. They burst onto the scene like
shooting stars and generally leave the same way. Type Twos last briefly, but have wide support during that
short period. The best example of this type is the Bull Moose Party in 1912. A more recent example is Ross
Perot’s Patriot Party in the 1990’s.

Whatever else one might say about third parties, they have been prolific; an estimated 1100 of them have come
and gone (mostly gone) since the early 19th century. Their traditional function in American politics has been to
propose new ideas and to advocate reform. And they have been most successful in this role. Indeed, third
parties originally proposed a substantial proportion of the programs associated with modern government,
including the progressive income tax, broad voter suffrage, the direct election of US Senators, and many of the
nation’s social welfare programs.

What they are not so good at is winning elections. Just 12 times in our national history have third parties
received more than five-percent of the vote. They have never won a national election since the Republicans
emerged from third party status in 1860 to elect Lincoln and only rarely are victorious for statewide office.

This brings us back to 2006 and the unusual circumstances surrounding the Green Party’s efforts to get on the
US Senate ballot in the Santorum/Casey race, mainly through the support of their good buddies in the
Santorum campaign team. The facts are clear enough. The Santorum campaign has helped Carl Romanelli, the
putative Green Party candidate, financially and otherwise in an attempt to qualify for the ballot. The threshold
to qualify this year to run for statewide office for third parties is a gargantuan 67,000 voter signatures on a
nominating petition.

Ultimately, with Santorum’s help, the Green Party filed 90,000 signatures for Romanelli, throwing state
Democrats into a state of apoplexy. Predictably Democratic Party leaders cried foul and they are challenging in
court the Green and Santorum campaign efforts, claming "petition insufficiency," a nice term meaning the Green’s don’t really have 67,000 valid voters because the petitions allegedly contain phony signatures, non voters, fake names, and the like.

Now, one of the many bizarre aspects of this developing tour de farce is the fact that the Greens and the Republicans are certainly not known for their close support of each other or collaboration. The words most likely used to describe their relationship would be words like "antagonistic," "antithetical," "inverse," or "polar opposites." Kissing cousins, they are not: in fact, pick an issue, almost any issue, and the Greens and the Republicans would be as different as day and night.

But ideological inconsistency is not the main issue here: it’s about commonsensical political judgment. The Santorum campaign’s efforts to help the Green Party qualify a candidate for a ballot position as a US Senate candidate are hopelessly quixotic; and the knee-jerk reaction of Democrat's is equally futile. Neither the Santorum campaign’s monetary assistance to the Greens nor the Democrats legal efforts to block the Greens is likely to have any impact on the race.

The hard facts are these: the Green’s have no money, no organization, no ground troops and most relevant of all, no voters. There are about eight million registered voters in the state and the Green Party has 16,000 of them. That’s about one fifth of one-percent. You can empty the ocean one thimble at a time sooner that the Greens will win an election with that kind of base.

But the real aim of the Santorum campaign is to siphon off liberal Democrats from US Senate candidate Bob Casey, unhappy Democrats who want a pro-choice and an anti Iraq War candidate to support.

To be sure, this is a reasonable objective for Santorum, but one with a small flaw--it won’t work. And in the long history of American politics there is little good evidence that such tactics ever work. Certainly, there is no recent precedent showing that third party nominees have made a difference in electoral outcomes.

There are two recent examples in Pennsylvania history, Ross Perot, the Reform Party candidate in the 1992 presidential contests, and Peg Luksik, a Constitutional Party candidate for governor in 1994. Both of these candidacies were based on a set of core ideological positions that seem likely to benefit one of the major parties at the expense of the other. But no advantage materialized. Clinton carried the state in 1992 and Tom Ridge won the governorship in 1994, and voter analysis indicates that would have been the case with or without the third party candidates.

Even more to the point, there is little proof that voters supporting third party candidates come predictably from the party assumed to be disadvantaged by the third parties presence on the ballot. All of Ross Perot’s voters did not come from one party, the same for Peg Luksik’s supporters.

Moreover, no sizable defection of voters has taken place from Casey and no revolt exists within his party to his candidacy. He leads a reasonably united party into the fall campaign.

The bottom line: the Santorum tactic just won’t work. And state Democrats too might look around for something more productive to do than to try to stop it. Third parties do matter in American politics--but they don’t matter in this race.
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