

Is it third party time?

By Joel Rogers

It's old news that most Americans are dissatisfied with current national politics. What's new is that more than a third of registered voters now say they would vote for a third-party alternative to the Republicans and the Democrats. This dissenting third of the electorate wants a party that will "clean up government," "save our jobs" and "save our country for our children." They strongly support radical campaign finance and other "pro-democracy" reforms to give citizens a direct say in government, more nationalist and directive trade and industrial policies to improve working-class jobs, and much more government accountability in the stewardship of public resources.

These are, of course, precisely the issues that Ross Perot has been hammering on for more than a year, with obvious popular resonance. What makes them truly explosive, however, is that they are almost impossible to address within our current two-party system.

Radical campaign finance reform? Both major parties are less parties than collections of permanent candidates, literally addicted to the private money that regularly returns them to office. Class-based economic nationalism? At the leadership level, both

major parties are dominated by big business interests unwilling to accept constraints on their trade or investment options. Accountability in government? Our two-and-only-two-party system is almost designed to limit accountability. With as much variation within the parties as between them (look at Michigan Rep. David Bonior and President Clinton duking it out on NAFTA), they are not even accountable to themselves.

The inability of the two-party system to respond to such concerns has thus opened a large and potentially stable market for third-party politics. The question is who will tap into it.

Ross Perot could, but at the moment he doesn't want to. Perot has

One-third of American voters say they would abandon the Democrats and Republicans and jump to a third party.

discouraged his supporters from forming a third party. He has devoted his energies instead to building United We Stand, a giant civic association. With millions of dues-paying members, United We Stand is already a phenomenon. But it's not a political party.

Without Perot's billions, though, other groups have been trying to build such a party. They face enormous barriers—a lack of money, a determinedly hostile legal environment and winner-take-all election rules that usually render votes for minor parties "wasted."

But at least one of them—the New Party, with which I am associated—is making some steady progress. The New Party is a grass-roots-based, membership-run, progressive party, with values heavily overlapping those of the "dissenting third." We hope one day to be the new majority party of the United States. Here's how we're getting to that distant point.

We never "waste" our members' votes. The New Party supports candidates only where we know we are truly competitive. At the moment, that means local elections—county supervisor seats, school boards, city councils, the occasional state assembly race. Last year, in Wisconsin, Missouri and Arkansas, we won 20 of 28 such elections. This fall, in Michigan, Montana, New Jersey and New York, we expect more success. Next year, maybe, a congressional seat or two. But we only invest our energy where we have the capacity to win.

We're reviving "fusion." Where we are not yet competitive, we stay out of the elections entirely and endorse the more progressive of the mainstream candidates—or, where the law permits, nominate that candidate on our own ballot line. This last option, known as "plural nomination" or "fusion," lets our members participate in mainstream politics while showing their support for us. They vote for Democrat Smith or Republican Jones, and their vote counts, but they also send

them a message, showing them where their support comes from by voting for them on the New Party line. Having the fusion option expands voter choice and strengthens third parties. This is why major parties have widely banned the practice, which used to be universal in the United States. We're fighting to bring it back.

We serve our base. We serve as a shared point of contact for activist groups that share our values and support our candidates. We support those groups directly in local struggles—strikes, fair housing campaigns, school reform efforts, abortion clinic defenses—that involve our members. And we engage in a range of educational and recreational activities to build an active, informed membership. All this helps to connect our members to each other, to connect our elected officials to members and to make it possible to put that base in motion in support of our officials once they are elected.

We are down for democracy. America's ills are the ills of a society that no longer trusts its citizens with real power. We favor giving all Americans a "democratic tool kit" of rights, remedies and organizational resources for use in their roles as citizen/voters, workers, consumers, taxpayers and shareholders. Public funding of elections, and universal rights to recall, referendum and initiative, are good places to start this democratic revolution,

which we're taking to the states.

Will this broad strategy succeed in moving us forward? Certainly. Will it reach all of the "dissenting third" tomorrow? Certainly not. Might \$100 million (\$10 million, \$5 million) help speed that along? Sure, but we don't have it. Is it third party time in America? Stay tuned. ◀

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