

<https://www.internationalviewpoint.org/spip.php?article60>



USA

The Green Party and the 2004 election

- IV Online magazine - 2004 - IV361 e-Supplement - Autumn 2004 -

Publication date: Saturday 16 October 2004

Copyright © International Viewpoint - online socialist magazine - All rights reserved

In an election year when so many antiwar activists, progressives and even socialists are embracing the "anybody but Bush" ("ABB") rationale for giving backhanded support to pro-war, pro-corporate John Kerry, the Green Party of the United States emerged from its June convention deeply divided.

This was the significance of the vote of convention delegates in Milwaukee in which a slim majority - 408 out of 767 voting delegates - voted to nominate little-known Green Party leader David Cobb for President while denying the party's endorsement to the campaign of Ralph Nader and Peter Camejo. (Nader, who is running as an independent, was seeking the party's endorsement. He had earlier rejected being nominated as its candidate.)

This vote did not mean that a majority of registered Greens support Cobb rather than Nader, nor that the concessions to "lesser evil" politics incorporated in the Cobb campaign reflect the majority view of party members. Two crucial factors resulted in Cobb winning the majority of delegates.

1. Convention rules, including an electoral college-type representation system, gave states with small membership disproportionate voting weight as compared to states like California and New York, which were overwhelmingly for Nader.
1. Nader failed to seek and actively campaign for the Green Party nomination.

Clearly, Cobb supporters out-organized and out-mobilized those supporting the Nader-Camejo campaign, at times utilizing methods that conflict with Green Party principles of grassroots democracy.

The pressures on the Green Party in this presidential election year to water down its independent politics, and to support the Democratic nominee have been overwhelming. For most of the past century, the broad "left" - the labor movement, the women's movement, the Black movement, and all other movements for peace and social justice including many of those who have identified as socialists - have been wedded to the Democratic party in what may be best described as an abusive "marriage".

The Democrats continuously betrayed the interests of the progressive movements but those movements refused to leave because of the threat of the "greater evil", the Republicans. The idea of building a party independent of the two-party system, representing working people and the oppressed, though seen as a good idea in the abstract, was put off to the indefinite future.

The fruits of this strategy should be apparent: Numerous attempts to "reform" the Democratic Party have led nowhere. To the contrary, our country continues to lack universal health care, and both parties have moved increasingly to the right, embracing policies of corporate globalization, increased social inequality, and perpetual war.

At the same time, the electoral system remains undemocratically rigged to deny a voice to anyone outside the two corporate parties. Basic reforms have yet to be achieved, including elimination of the electoral college, establishing a system of run-off voting (e.g. Instant Runoff Voting) to insure majority rule and ending any "spoiler" factor, and instituting proportional representation, open debates, and publicly financed elections.

The Green Promise

The Green Party has been the most promising effort in many decades to build independent political action that is antiwar, pro-labor, pro-environment and pro-social justice. Nader's high-profile 2000 campaign not only won 3% of the vote nationally (2.7 million votes) but was extremely effective in helping to grow the Green Party on a local level, recruiting many new activists into the party and giving impetus to local campaigns.

Approximately 300,000 Americans people now registered Green throughout the country. More than 200 Greens now hold political office, five times what existed eight years ago. In a few places, such as San Francisco, the Green Party has become the "second" party.

After the 2000 election, the Democrats tried to nip this growing third party threat in the bud. They accused Nader of "spoiling", causing Bush's election. The accusation ignored the fact that more Democrats voted for Bush than for Nader, and that the Democrats refused to challenge the racist and corrupt voting system in Florida. The Democrats also exposed their own hypocrisy by failing, after the election, to fight for any steps to reform the electoral system.

The Retreat

However, the charge of "spoiling" not only found resonance with many progressives outside the Green Party but also some leaders of the Green Party itself, who started moving away from independent politics. Late last year, 17 party leaders began openly calling for defeating Bush in 2004, calling on the party to refrain from running a serious presidential campaign in all states. [\[1\]](#)

Faced with this opposition from some Greens to a Nader run, he decided not to seek the Green Party's nomination and instead to run as an independent. Unfortunately, Nader's decision not to accept the nomination or to show up at the convention alienated many potential Nader supporters among Green Party delegates who, out of a sense of party loyalty, decided to vote for Cobb. Cobb promised to "grow the Green Party" through his campaign.

Nader's nomination of Peter Camejo, a prominent California Green and former gubernatorial candidate, as his running mate was helpful but ultimately insufficient to win over enough of these delegates, although ironically, a Nader endorsement would have been much more effective in growing the Greens.

Since the convention, despite its Green Party ballot line in 29 states, the Cobb campaign has been almost invisible. At the same time, while facing an uphill battle to obtain ballot status in a sufficient number of states to be able to mount a serious challenge to the corporate duopoly, the Nader-Camejo campaign has remains in the press.

Obstacles have included a Democratic Party campaign to smear Nader and to impose additional roadblocks to ballot access, which Nader has labeled "political skullduggery" as well as undemocratic election laws requiring that huge numbers of signatures be gathered in a very short period of time.

As of the early August date writing of this article, Nader has submitted enough signatures to get on the ballot in 17 states and expects to be the Reform Party standard bearer in seven more. But he failed to gather enough signatures to get on the California ballot. (The campaign submitted close to 100,000 signatures but over 153,000 signatures were required.) The campaign still hopes to be on the ballot in 40 states.

Despite these setbacks and the pressures from supporters of “ABB” — Nader is polling the same percentage in a three-way race as the votes he received in 2000. More importantly, while many Kerry supporters are supporting Kerry as the lesser evil to Bush, their politics are actually closer to Nader than to Kerry. Nader is the only candidate with a significant public face who is putting forth a clear antiwar and anti-corporate message in this election, a message that resonates with a large percentage of the population.

To his credit, Cobb has also spoken against the war in Iraq and is critical of both corporate parties. And unlike some others on the left, Cobb states he wants to build the Green Party in the here and now. Cobb, however, has shown himself willing to subordinate that goal to one of defeating Bush. While campaigning for the nomination, he proposed a “safe states” strategy that would avoid campaigning in so-called “battleground states” in order not to “help re-elect George Bush”.

Cobb's nomination at the Green Party Convention has had the impact of preventing Nader from being on the ballot in many of those same battleground states, a result that must have greatly pleased the Democrats. Tellingly Cobb's running mate, Pat LaMarche, was one of the 17 who signed the letter urging the Greens not to run a serious presidential campaign. Presently, Cobb/LaMarche are campaigning to “help remove Bush, Cheney and their ilk from office on November 2”, thus encouraging Cobb supporters to vote for Kerry. By legitimating “lesser evil” politics in this fashion, Cobb may actually discourage potential Green Party recruits from leaving the Democrats and joining the Greens.

A Green Future

In contrast, Green Party leader Matt Gonzalez, President of the San Francisco Board of Supervisors and a Nader supporter, explained, “The most egregious offenses of the Bush Presidency, the Patriot Act and the War in Iraq, carried overwhelming Democratic Support. Progressives justly feel abandoned - Republican or Republican Lite is a dismal choice to make”.

The political division in the Green Party, though a serious one, does not, as some commentators have suggested, mean the end of the Greens. Whatever happens in this November, Greens committed to independent political action and democratic functioning are in a good position to organize within the Green Party so that the party will be able to run future campaigns that challenge corporate rule without hedging or apology.

[1] The probable outcome of 40 states is already known to be either pro-Bush or pro-Kerry. So 10 states are considered the “battleground” where the election will be determined. These are such states as Ohio, Michigan and Florida.