

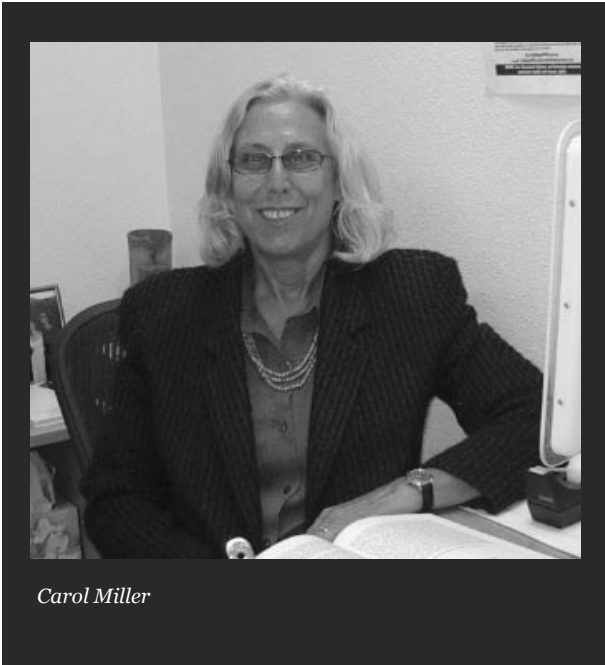
Back Road to The White House

Independents and 2008

Jacqueline Salit

Amidst the constant political chatter about the 2008 presidential race – Will Hillary run? Can McCain get the Republican nomination? Is Jeb Bush next in line for the throne? – there is occasional speculation about an independent presidential candidacy in 2008. Jesse Ventura, Louis Farrakhan, Ralph Nader and even John McCain have either been mentioned or proffered themselves as prospective independent contenders.

But once the name is floated – usually under a headline like “Ventura Weighs 2008 Indie Bid” – the story itself is paper thin, largely because the analysts have little or no idea of how an independent presidential candidacy actually takes shape. (The independent movement itself can be less than swift on this matter, too.) This is partly a function of the fact that, between elections, the media pundits don’t attend to the independent movement. They believe that ongoing life exists only in the major parties – that the independent terrain is the political equivalent of Mars.



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But there is life in the independent political movement, including stirrings around the 2008 presidential race. While you don't need a telescope or a microscope to see them, you can't use a major party lens either. For one thing, the parties involved are too small. For another, much of what now goes on in the independent movement – whatever survived the implosion of Ross Perot's Reform Party, the political schizophrenia of the Greens, and the stagnation of the Libertarians – exists outside national parties altogether. That said, the movement as a whole, including its “anti-party” or non-party elements, has begun in various ways to turn its attention to 2008.

Carol Miller was one of several initiators of Ralph Nader's independent presidential bid in 2004. A high-profile leader of the New Mexico Green Party and a respected figure in the national party, Miller was among those who urged Nader to run in 2004 – not as a Green, but as an independent. “Rising above parties” was the objective, says Miller, who had hoped that the Greens would nominate Nader, thereby entering into a coalition broader than the party itself. The Green Party nominating convention, however, rejected the Nader candidacy, instead choosing David Cobb, a Green Party member (unlike Nader), after a hotly contested convention – a “fundamentally undemocratic” affair, according to Miller. At the time of the nomination Miller contended that “Cobb represents a political capitulation away from an independence from the two corporate-controlled parties.” She was referring to Cobb's “safe states” strategy, whereby voters were encouraged to vote for the Green presidential candidate only in states where the outcome between John Kerry and George Bush was already predetermined.

Do the bad feelings about the Greens' choice of Cobb persist today? The “healing” isn't complete, Miller acknowledges. But, she adds, “I'm very forgiving.” And the convention process itself? “A group has been convened for 2008 that wants to change the rules,” says Miller, referring to Greens for Democracy and Independence, a national caucus-style network cultivated by Nader's 2004 vice presidential candidate, Peter Camejo, also a Green. “It's a reform movement,” Miller explains, that seeks to change the delegate selection process to bring it more in line with the principle of one person, one vote and to reaffirm the Greens' “complete independence” from the Democratic and Republican parties.

Failing to bring the Green Party as a whole into the Nader camp (though Miller is quick to point out that many Green leaders broke ranks with their own party and endorsed Nader's bid) was not the only stumbling block for the independent candidacy, she observes. "I thought it could work, but part way through we began to run into trouble."

Trouble took the form of the one-note media: "They had only one story – how it was going to affect John Kerry," Miller recalls. "It was the wrong story. The wonderful platform was the story, but you couldn't get it out." And, as if the myopic media coverage wasn't bad enough, the ballot access problems were daunting. "It's a rigged electoral system," she charges.

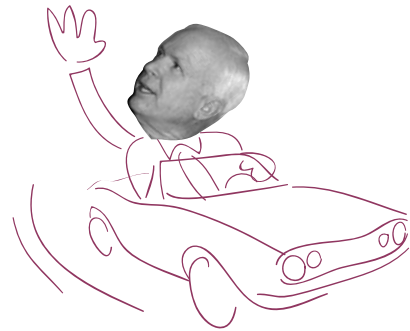
The Nader campaign was the target of a frontal assault by the Democratic Party, which sought to remove him from the ballot wherever possible. Not only were the campaign's petitions challenged, but the very form of the candidacy – a coalitional design that knit together state parties and activists allied with Choosing An Independent President (ChIP), the Reform Party's six ballot lines (unlike the Greens, Reform endorsed Nader), and independent candidate petitions – came under attack in Florida, New Mexico and Pennsylvania. The anti-coalition lower court rulings were overturned on appeal but, Miller notes, if independents "get squeezed" into the form of the two parties the independent movement will suffer.

Miller rejects a fusion strategy – in which independent voter associations or parties endorse major party candidates – as "too limited." She argues that while independents endorse Democrats, "they never endorse us. It's not bi-directional." The idea of across-the-board fusion – where independents choose candidates from the range of options, including Republicans – seems to be a non-starter for the Green leader. But, well aware that third parties now attract under 2% of the vote nationally although 35% of Americans say they are independents, she is concerned that the major parties are out to capture the independent vote: "I'm worried that John McCain, a hawk, has been anointed the independent. Every time his name is mentioned, it's 'the independent, John McCain.'"

Miller also imagines continued hysteria on the part of the Democrats in 2008. Recalling that in 2004 it was Anybody But Bush, in 2008, she predicts, "It's going to be Anybody But Anybody."

Was the decision by many Green leaders to back Nader, despite the party's endorsement of Cobb, a signal that they prefer coalitional strategies rather than a more narrow and limited party strategy? Miller doesn't think so. "Nader was the best candidate and we weren't willing to take a vacation," she says of the Green leaders who went with him. "Our party did not choose the most qualified candidate – so we supported the best candidate."

For the moment, Miller remains committed to the Green Party, although she says the New Mexico Greens are currently appraising their relationship to the national party to see whether and to what extent it embraces the Camejo-led reform movement.



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Independents gather at 2000 Anti-Corruption Awards in New York City. (l. to r.) Dean Barkley; Fred Newman; Independence Party of New York chairman Frank MacKay; Cathy Stewart, New York county chair, IPNY; Jim Mangia; Jacqueline Salit; former New York state senator Pedro Espada; IPNY state committee member Lenora Fulani.

Fred Newman, the political philosopher who conceived and launched the Choosing An Independent President (ChIP) initiative in 2003, was a major Nader backer in 2004. In 2000 Newman, together with long-time colleague Jim Mangia, a former national secretary of the Reform Party and today a leader of California's Committee for an Independent Voice, invited Nader into Reform's national primary to run against Pat Buchanan. (Nader turned the offer down.) Skeptical about the Greens' current debate, Newman asks: "Why are they having a debate about the Democratic Party at all? You have to have a justification for having a new party or a new movement. The issue is not whether you do or don't work with the Democrats, or the Republicans – or ChIP, for that matter. You work with whomever you choose to work with. The issue is what you stand for. If you stand for something that is inconsistent with the Democrats and Republicans, then you don't have these debates," he adds. "You only have these debates if you stand for nothing. You have petty fights if you can't find a deeper moral reason for being together."

Newman is less concerned with the Greens' seeming identity crisis – "As long as they're fixated on who they should and shouldn't work with, they're just as partisan as any Democrat or Republican" – than he is with what he calls a "fixation on a doctrine of centrism"

in the independent movement. Given the polarization in American political life, he observes, 2004 was a year that centrism should have taken hold – if there had been a basis for it. "Notice that none emerged," he points out. "To me that counts as evidence that the American people are not interested in a 'center.'"

But wasn't the Kerry campaign, which lost by only three million votes, an effort by the Democratic Party to become more centrist? "The Kerry campaign was a fanatical campaign," Newman responds. "Anybody But Bush? 'The Republicans are evil'? These are fanatical conceptions."

In 2004 the independent movement struggled at the margins. Under pressure from within and without, the independent vote dropped from its high-water mark in 1992 – Ross Perot's 20% – to under 2% of the national vote for all the independent presidential candidates combined. But Newman does not see those results as signaling the end of the movement. "If '04 was the end of anything, it was the end of centrism," he says. "Perotian, Weickerian, Venturan – every brand of centrism. It doesn't follow that the doctrine that takes its place is extremism. That dichotomy is not fruitful. There has to be some moral value expressed by independents for them to become a mass movement. I don't think the independents have found it yet."



What was achieved for independents in the 2004 presidential cycle? “There were some modest, but important, moves,” Newman says. “In 2000 we were effectively working to bring Nader and Buchanan together in the Reform Party. But the egos were too big – except when it came to national television, when they not only appeared together but were friendly! The Reform Party virtually destroyed itself and the Greens got caught up in their usual sectarianism.” And the lessons learned? “We had to forget about the big shots and go back to the grassroots, to the handfuls of people who hung in, and reconstruct a political movement out of those handfuls. ChIP has done that and continues to do that. That was key to bringing people together in a Nader campaign that produced over 450,000 votes. And for 2008 it’s key because independents at the base need to be in a position to shape the future of the movement. You could get a major, or a ‘major minor,’ candidate running for president in 2008 outside the two parties. If independents don’t have their own infrastructure and their own vision, they’ll be forced to the sidelines of their own movement.”

Newman, who was instrumental in landing the New York Independence Party’s 2004 endorsement of Nader – the candidate polled nearly a quarter of his national vote total on the IP line – continues: “We have to work hard at the base to bring independents together, even as we engage the question of ‘together to do what?’”

What do independents stand for as the 2008 presidential race takes shape? “There has to be some kind of moral paradigm that is manifest in everything we do,” Newman argues. “The closest we’ve come so far, in my opinion, is *We don’t want to be divided by partisanism*. America doesn’t fight wars that way. We don’t put people from the blue states in one barracks and the red state people in another. But government and politics are almost entirely about partisanship and that’s what independents are

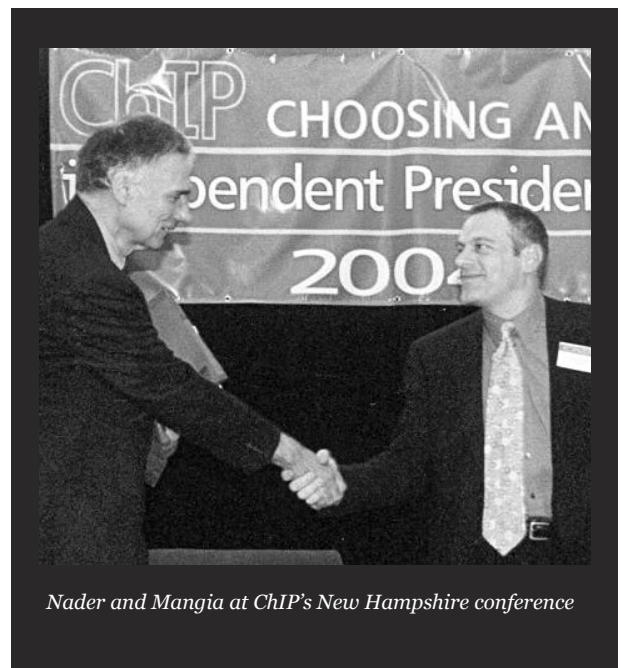
reacting to. I think the moral paradigm we’re looking for is some form of ‘we’re all in this together’ without excluding the rest of the world, and that ‘independence means independent of partisan politics.’”

As Newman, Mangia and others involved in refining the ChIP strategy continue the work of building infrastructure that simultaneously expresses and creates the voice of independent voters, Dean Barkley, the strategist credited with Jesse Ventura’s independent gubernatorial win in Minnesota in 1998, also refutes the idea that the independent movement is finished.

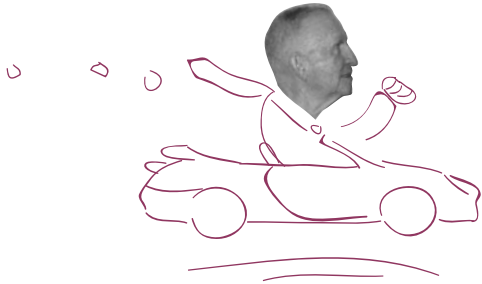
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— *Fred Newman*

“My counter is that the best thing that the third-party movement has going for it is the abysmal failure of the other two parties,” Barkley observes dryly. “They aren’t going to change their ways. They’re only worried about maintaining power just to be in power, not to do what’s right for the country. We’re in a stupid war in Iraq that doesn’t seem to have any end in sight. I think that the two parties are just absolutely doing a wonderful job of resurrecting the potential for independent candidates again. I guarantee if John McCain decided to run for president as an independent, he’d win. I don’t think he has the guts to do it, but he’s one example of someone who could pull it together.”



Nader and Mangia at ChIP's New Hampshire conference



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If the two parties, by virtue of their self-aggrandizement at the expense of the country, are “resurrecting” opportunity, how does Barkley think the independent movement can take advantage of that opportunity? “They’ve got to learn from our past mistakes. It can’t be built with just a singular person. It’s got to be starting with people who want to actually make a difference and do the hard work of organizing.”

Adds Barkley, in Texas to manage his next independent gubernatorial campaign – Kinky Friedman recently threw his cowboy hat into the ring (see “The Texas Two-Step,” p. 5) — “I’ve already got them thinking about building a strong alternative party in Texas. That’s what you’ve got to do. Minnesota, New York, still have pretty viable parties. They’re both surviving. We’ve got pockets here and there, but we put the Perot thing together in nothing flat. It can come out of nowhere very quickly, if you get the right circumstance...The question is, can those who have done this in the past help put together something that’s going to last a little bit longer than Perot’s personality? That’s the question.”

Can you get independents to coalesce? “The only way it’s going to work in ’08 is if you find the charismatic candidate, I hate to say it, that can get people excited,” says Barkley. “I don’t think there’s any way that we’re at the point now that we have enough state organization and whatnot that we could come together with someone who’s literally unknown and do anything other than make a token showing.” But with the right candidate, Barkley predicts, “it could take off so quickly that you’d have a hard time keeping up with it.”

For Carol Miller, the independents’ growth trajectory is through a party-building process. For Fred Newman, it has to do with developing both grassroots infrastructure and a “moral paradigm” that gives expression to the meaning of political independence. For Dean Barkley, it’s about a candidate who can galvanize a base. At the moment, 2008 may seem far off. But these tactical and philosophical questions and clashes are already in the mix. That a movement with such tremendous – some would say revolutionary – political potential is addressing them is, arguably, a healthy signpost on the back road to the White House. Stay tuned. **NEO**