

TEA PARTIES AND OTHER SUCH DIVERSIONS.

Can a third party win a Presidential election?

by Vic Berecz

Our nation has a long history of third (or fourth) party candidates who made a difference in Presidential elections ... though none of them has ever been elected. To name just a few who received very significant vote counts, there were John C. Fremont (33%) and Millard Fillmore (22%) in 1856, John C. Breckenridge (18%) and John Bell (12%) in 1860, Teddy Roosevelt in 1912 (27%); Bob LaFollette in 1924 (17%); and Ross Perot in 1992 (19%). But, often even a small popular vote can make a big difference. You've probably never heard of James Birney of the Liberty Party whose few votes swung New York and the election of 1844 to the Democrats, or of James Baird Weaver of the Greenback Labor Party who garnered 306,000 votes in 1880 when the major party candidates popular count differed by less than 2000 votes! But, many of us do remember Strom Thurmond in 1948 and Ralph Nader in 2000 each of whom, with only about 2% of the vote, made a big difference in those close elections. Since none (except perhaps Roosevelt as a popular ex-President) had any reasonable chance to win, some call them spoilers. But, one person's *spoiler* is another's *protector*.

Third parties that make significant inroads, if only for a few years, are often single-issue groups that are strongly *anti*-something ... the anti-immigration American Party of the mid-1800s, the anti-alcohol Prohibition Party at the turn of the last century, and maybe today's anti-big-government Libertarian Party. These parties often play out after a few years because their cause becomes seen as hopelessly quixotic, or because their cause gathers popular acclaim and is successfully integrated into one or both of the major party platforms.

The other third party staple is an individual viewed as *savior* who comes forward to end excessive divisiveness either within one of the major parties or between the two dominant parties. Teddy Roosevelt and Ross Perot are obvious examples of these two scenarios. These efforts rarely outlive the individual that initiated them. I should note here that this phenomena doesn't only occur at the Presidential level ... former governors Jesse Ventura of Minnesota and Lowell Weicker of Connecticut are recent examples of successful third party candidates at the state level.

If *excessive divisiveness* and *un-addressed strongly-held issues* are the instigators of third party movements, it would seem that the decade we are now entering may yield a rash of such movements unlike any decade since the one that preceded the American Civil War. The *Tea Party* movement that's just getting underway may evolve in that direction. Then again, perhaps Ralph Nader's insightful "fictional vision that may become a new reality" titled *Only the Super-Rich Can Save Us!* may stir others into like action with a different focus. And, there are several individuals with the experience, stature, money, and/or *cahones* to step up and lead such movements ... perhaps an Evan Bayh, or a Sarah Palin, or a Michael Bloomberg. So to answer my initial question, in all likelihood a third party won't ever win a Presidential election, on the other hand ...

... weirder things have happened!

© Copyright 2010 by Victor G. Berecz, Jr. All Rights Reserved.