Prospects for Resistance to Capitalism in the United States after the 2004 Election

John C. Berg

Suffolk University

Paper prepared for delivery at the Congress of the International Political Science Association
Fukuoka, 9-13 July 2006

Introduction

Most progressive activists have one of two views about what they are doing. Some think that capitalism is eternal and inevitable, so that one can only struggle to make it better than it might otherwise be; others think that capitalism can be replaced with a better system, and that we should strive to make such a change happen. Some of the second group think that capitalism can be replaced only through extra-constitutional means — armed struggle, a general strike, or massive civil disobedience, for example. For the rest, electoral politics is crucial. Electoral politics is also favored by portions of the other groups: it is
one way of improving the lot of the oppressed, and elections can sometimes trigger a revolution.\textsuperscript{1} However, for those seeking a peaceful transition to a better system, it is the only means possible.

However, it does not follow from this premise that those seeking a peaceful replacement of the capitalist system should immediately focus their efforts on electoral politics. In the absence of a mass movement, progressive electoral activism risks degenerating into sectarian irrelevance. This paper focuses on one attempt at transformative electoral politics, the activities of the Green Party from the aftermath of the 2000 election to the present. During this period the potential developed through the 2000 Nader campaign was dissipated, but the party has since regrouped and is pressing forward at the state and local level. The paper will close with an evaluation of the prospects for success of this renewed activity.

The Greens after 2000

After the 2000 election the US Greens appeared to have a bright future. They had grown in visibility, votes, membership, and organization, and appeared to have held the balance of power between the two major parties. Given the widespread public satisfaction with the state of the American two-party system, it seemed possible that the Greens could trigger a realignment of that system, catalyzing the emergence of a new major party, just as the small abolitionist parties of the 1840s had broken the path for the emergence of the Republican party in the 1850s.\textsuperscript{2} The Greens continued to grow in the 2002 mid-term elections, and in 2003 came very close to electing the first Green mayor of a major city, when Matt Gonzalez, a Green member of the city’s Board of Supervisors, got 47\% of the vote in the San Francisco run-off election.

\begin{itemize}
\item[1.] This is more or less the position of Vladimir Ilyich Lenin, “Left-Wing” Communism, an Infantile Disorder (Peking: Foreign Languages Press, 1965).
\end{itemize}
However, very little of this potential was realized in 2004. Neither the Greens nor their erstwhile presidential candidate, Ralph Nader, had a visible impact on the outcome. The Greens lost ballot access in several states, and the number of Green victories in local elections declined from 2002. There were a few high spots, including the reelection of the nation’s only Green state legislator, John Eder of Maine, and the election of Ross Mirkarimi to the San Francisco Board of Supervisors. Despite these, the Green situation in 2004 appeared to bear a closer resemblance to that of the People’s party in 1896, which never recovered from its endorsement of the Democrat William Jennings Bryan, than to the abolitionist parties of the 1840s.

The 2000 Green Campaign

Veteran consumer activist Ralph Nader actively sought and won the Green nomination for president in 2000. Nader’s campaign featured grassroots activism; a series of massive, paid-admission, super-rallies with audiences of 10,000 and up; an attempt by Nader to force his way into the first televised debate; and a single television ad. At times Nader reached 8% support in the polls. His final total, driven down by Duverger’s law, was only 2.7%, but was enough to change the outcome in Florida, and thus the outcome of the election. If Nader had not run in Florida, Al Gore would have won the presidency. This fact infuriated Democrats, but it also gave the Greens some leverage for the next election.


The Greens had nominated Nader because they hoped that running a relatively high-profile presidential candidate would help the party grow. This hope was borne out; the Green party reached a new level of success as a result of the 2000 campaign. Eight new state Green parties grew out of the campaign, bringing the national total to 34; party registration increased 63%, to 194,000; and both the numbers of Green candidates for state and local office, and the numbers of such candidates who were elected, rose by the highest proportion since 1992.

The 2000 Nader campaign also brought an effective end to the bitter factional dispute that had plagued the Greens for at least five years. Both of the factions, the Association of State Green Parties (ASGP) and the Greens/Green Party USA (G/GPUSA) nominated Nader, but the ASGP was clearly the main campaign vehicle. After the election a group of leading members from both sides of the dispute drew up a compromise unity plan, which was adopted by the ASGP; when the G/GPUSA was unable to approve the plan (because of its proxy-voting system, which gave a handful of members a majority of the votes), that organization split in turn, with most members going over to the pro-unity side. The ASGP then proceeded unilaterally to transform itself into the Green Party of the United States (GPUS), while its rival has been pushed to the margins of political life.5

Historic Parallels

The Greens’ situation after 2000 resembled in some ways the situation of the Liberty party after 1844. Then, too, a small radical party had twice run a protest candidate for President. James Gillespie Birney’s 1840 campaign was nearly invisible (Birney himself spent almost the entire period between his nomination and the election traveling to England to take part in the Antislavery Convention of 1840), and he received only a few thousand votes. In 1844, Birney did slightly better, and won enough votes in New York and Michigan to tip those states from the Whig candidate, Henry Clay, to the Democrat, James Polk, making Polk president. Although both Clay and Polk were slaveholders, Polk was generally

considered the more pro-slavery in policy preferences, and his election led directly to the annexation of Texas as a new slave state. Birney and the Liberty party were widely criticized for having brought Polk’s victory about; however, this result also convinced many antislavery Whigs that their party had no future, and they left that party, uniting with other antislavery politicians first in the Free Soil, and ultimately in the Republican party, which won the presidency in 1860. Birney and the Liberty party can fairly be said to have catalyzed these events, although the Liberty party itself did not survive the cataclysm.  

The growth of minor party activity has always been seen as one of the indicators of an approaching realignment of the party system. The developments of the 1840s and 1850s suggest that minor parties may be more than indicators. By identifying an issue that is suppressed by the existing party system, and a block of voters whose votes are determined by that issue, minor parties can help to bring a realignment about. Similar analyses can be made of the roles of minor parties in bringing about realignment in 1896, 1932, and (if it is accepted as a realignment) the 1960s.


It could be argued that global justice constituted such a suppressed issue in 2000. The social movements that came together in Seattle and subsequently to demand that globalization not lead to the worsening of working conditions, the abandonment of environmental protection, and the destruction of indigenous cultures did not feel represented by either the Republican or the Democratic party, since the leadership of both parties had supported the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) and the World Trade Organization (WTO). Patrick Buchanan sought to mobilize concerns over globalization on a nationalistic, America-first basis, while the Greens, like most of the protestors, framed the issue as “global justice.” As this movement grew, the Greens had the potential to become its electoral arm.

The Election of 2002

The mid-term election of 2002 brought more growth to the Greens. The ballot status Greens had won in many states because of Nader’s success was both a resource and a challenge: it made it easier to run Green candidates, but also meant that such candidates had to attain a minimum level of support if ballot status was not to be revoked. By and large the Greens rose to the challenge. In Massachusetts, for example, the Greens had never run a state-wide campaign prior to 2000, when Nader’s 6.4% vote share gave them official ballot status. In order to keep this new status the Massachusetts Greens had to create a legal party organization, with a state committee, annual convention, and other legally-mandated party organs, and win at least 3 per cent of the the vote for some state-wide office in 2002. They succeeded, with visible, attractive candidates who received 3.5% of the vote for Governor/Lieutenant Governor, and 8% of the vote for state Treasurer. Similar results were achieved across the country.

———


The number of state and local candidates grew by 96%, to 558, from 2000 to 2002, while the number of those candidates who were elected grew by 59%, to 78. Notably, the Greens elected their second-ever member of a state legislature, John Eder of Maine. Green momentum continued to build through 2003, with 270 candidates in the off-year election, Gonzalez’s 47% finish in San Francisco, and the election of Jason West as Mayor of the Village of New Paltz, New York, who won a flurry of attention when he became the second mayor nationally to perform same-sex marriages (the first was Gavin Newsom of San Francisco, the man who had defeated Matt Gonzalez).

The Greens’ Prospects in 2004

As far as their internal affairs were concerned, the Greens were in a strong position to begin the 2004 presidential campaign. However, they did face two problems. First, relations between the party and its past presidential candidate, Ralph Nader, were strained. On one side, Nader and his personal staff had been highly critical of Green party organizational efforts during the 2000 campaign. In a post-election analysis of Nader’s failure to get 5% of the vote, Micah Sifry cites several criticisms of the Greens by “a close Nader advisor:” the Green nominating convention was too early to let the candidate maximize federal “primary season” matching funds; Greens cared more about state and local elections than the presidential campaign; Greens failed to organize for the mammoth rallies; and in October the ASGP issued a statement calling for the suspension of US aid to Israel until it withdrew from the occupied territories, a position Nader did not share.

From the other side, John Rensenbrink lists several Green grievances with Nader at the end of 2003: “his personal style is too aloof; he does not involve the party in his strategy planning; he is unilateral and mercurial in his actions; he is not a Green; he is in danger of becoming a ‘perennial

11. The first Green state legislator, Audie Bock of California, had change from Green to independent during her first term of office.

candidate;’ his message is that of ‘a one-noter’ (the anti-corporate mantra); and that the net effect of these and other factors is a drag on the Green Party.”. A further grievance was that Nader had refused to give the Green party a list of those who had contributed to his campaign fund until two years after the election. Given these grievances and misunderstandings, the Greens were divided as to the desirability of nominating Nader again in 2004.

The Greens’ second problem was George W. Bush and his remarkable ability to polarize American public opinion. When they were criticized by Democrats in 2000 for having cost Gore the election, Greens bore the criticism with equanimity, pointing to Gore’s ineffective campaign, his inability to carry either his own state or President Clinton’s, and the chicanery of the Supreme Court majority as the real reasons Gore lost. However, following Bush’s declaration of the “War on Terror,” and particularly after the U.S. invasion of Iraq, Greens began to feel the pressure of “Anyone But Bush.” As Rensenbrink put it:

If Nader seems strong enough with enough voters so that he looks as if he might equal or even do a little better than the 3 million votes (about 3%) he garnered in 2000, will he again be attacked as a spoiler—and is that the kind of baggage the Green Party wants to carry on its back in its efforts to sustain momentum and gain even more? Wouldn’t the party be better off grooming one or more of its own up-from-the-ranks leaders to run for president/vice president? Or why not sit out the 2004 election altogether, is an additional argument made by some; a variation of which is for the Green Party to choose a candidate who will be willing to bow out before the election in return for agreement from the Democrats to adopt some of the Green Party’s key issues.14


These two problems were to loom much larger during the coming year.

The Election of 2004

The Green presidential candidate in 2000, Ralph Nader, was a well-known and widely-respected national figure. He appeared on 44 state ballots (including the District of Columbia), and received about 2,883,105 votes, finishing third. The Green candidate in 2004, David Cobb, was little known outside the Green party. He appeared on 28 state ballots, and received 119,751 votes, finishing sixth. This decline was the direct result of the problems with Nader and Bush described above, with contributory influence from various Democrats, notably Howard Dean and the team of MoveOn.Org, who worked to bring the 2000 voters into the Democratic camp.

Green Problems with Nader

Sometime in late 2003, Nader began to let it be known that he intended to run for President again, but this time not as a Green. As Ted Glick put it in his syndicated “Future Hope” column:

By all reports, he [i.e., Nader] is upset with the criticism that some former strong Nader supporters in the Greens have made of him, and he believes that the Greens aren't growing fast enough. He is reportedly saying that he does not want to announce as a possible Green Party candidate, raise lots of money and put in lots of energy and then, at the nominating convention in late June in Milwaukee, not be chosen as the candidate, or see the party decide upon a particular strategy for whomever is its Presidential candidate that he would have to abide by if chosen.15

Nader commented elsewhere that the Green convention was scheduled “too late” for him to run an effective campaign (New York Times, January 10, 2004), but it is difficult to regard this as a serious point, since one of his complaints in 2000 had been that the Green convention was too early. In any case, candidates customarily begin their campaigns well before the conventions at which they seek nomination. Presumably Nader’s real concern was that he might seek the Green nomination but have it denied to him.

15. Ted Glick, “Jesse Then, Ralph Now?” (2003), Syndicated column.
Nader formally announced his independent candidacy on February 22, 2004. Although he did not participate in the Green party’s delegate selection process or enter any Green primaries, he made it clear that he would still like the Green party to draft him, and ultimately worked with Lorna Salzman, a declared candidate who ran as, in effect, Nader’s proxy. Meanwhile Nader sought and won the nomination of the Reform party and various single-state parties, while gathering signatures for independent ballot lines.

Nader’s decision raises two questions about his motives: Why did he run? And why did he choose not to run as a Green? The first of these looms much larger within the US than it does in other countries; the general attitude outside the US seems to be that the voters are perfectly capable of making strategic decisions for themselves, so that if they chose to vote for a ‘lesser evil’ in order to stop Bush, they would do so. However, in the US the prevailing assumption among political activists is that voters not capable of rational thought; it is therefore up to the parties and candidates to structure the strategic situation appropriately. Thus there was a “Ralph, Don’t Run” movement among left liberals, including many who had supported Nader’s candidacy in 2000. Nader’s response to this group was that his campaign would energize new constituencies and ultimately help the Democrats defeat Bush.

As for Nader’s decision not to seek the Green nomination, two explanations seem plausible. Either he thought it would be humiliating to undergo the Green party’s process of internal decision-making, which would have required him to enter primaries, debate other candidates, and subject himself to the oversight of party decision-makers; or he wanted to run without the ideological baggage of the “Green” label. The latter seems more likely. Nader had always argued that small-town conservatives — the kind of people who organize to keep Walmart out of their towns — should support his anti-monopoly agenda, and he seems to have believed that dropping the Green label, not to mention adding Reform, would help him with such voters. Had he entered Green primaries, in which many more people than the Green hard core could have voted, he would surely have won, and he must surely have realized that. So his shunning of the Green nomination is probably best understood as an attempt — largely unsuccessful — to shed his reputation as a leftist.
Whatever his motives may have been, Nader’s decision to avoid the Green party’s delegate selection process made him ineligible for the party’s nomination; but the party could still endorse him, a decision which would leave state Green parties free to offer him their ballot line or not, as they chose. By June 24, when the Green national convention met in Milwaukee, the Nader campaign was fighting for ballot access in many states, and the 23 Green states would have given it an important boost. Nader did not attend the convention, but announced on June 21 that Peter Camejo of California would be his running mate. Camejo was a leader of the California Greens, and had been the party’s candidate for governor during the Davis recall election, finishing third with about three percent of the vote. Camejo served as the leader of the Nader forces at the convention.

The leading candidate in the race for delegates was David Cobb, an attorney and long-time Green activist from Texas who had recently relocated to California and had run for Attorney General in that state. Cobb was an effective campaigner in person, but little known to the general public. He promised to campaign hard and effectively, but to concentrate on states where the two-party contest was not in doubt, in what became known as a “safe states” strategy. Coming into the convention Cobb had about 33% of the delegates; Camejo, Lorna Salzman, Carol Miller, and Paul Glover, each of whom had run as a Nader proxy in one or more states, had about 28%; 23% were uncommitted, 12% for no nomination, and the remaining few percent for Kent Mesplay. Following a Cobb-Camejo debate and the adoption of the platform, the balloting for the nomination began the morning of Saturday, June 26. On the first round, with most delegates pledged to a candidate, Cobb led with 308 votes, Camejo 119, Nader 117, no nominee 109, Salzman 40, Mesplay 24, and a handful of votes for others. In the second round delegates were free to vote as they wished, and candidates were required to sign a pledge to accept the nomination if they won — a step only Cobb, Mesplay, and Joann Beeman, a ‘favorite daughter’ candidate from Michigan, did. The Nader forces asked delegates to vote for no nomination; if that position won a majority, the convention could then move to endorse Nader, or perhaps, in a compromise suggested by Camejo, both Nader and Cobb, leaving it up to each state Green party to decide whose name should be
placed on the ballot in that state. Cobb needed an additional 77 votes, and got them when the roll call reached Virginia, making him the Green nominee.  

Cobb won for a combination of reasons. On one hand, the “Anybody but Bush” sentiment was shared by many Greens, who did not want potential allies to see them as saboteurs. Cobb’s “safe states” strategy appealed to this group; in reality, with the unknown Cobb as the party’s standard bearer no such strategy was needed, as he was unlikely to get enough votes to affect the outcome no matter how vigorously he campaigned.

On the other hand, many who might have supported Nader felt insulted by his decision to avoid the Green primaries, and his failure to appear at the convention. These decisions by Nader reinforced the bad feelings coming out of the 2000 campaign, leading many to feel that it was time for a Green candidate who was actually Green. Had Nader appeared at the convention, he would have gained many of these votes, perhaps enough to win the nomination. Had he run in the primaries, open to the broader public, he might well have come to the convention with the nomination sewed up in advance.

Green Problems with George W. Bush

The struggle over the Green party nomination took place in the shadow of George W. Bush and the war in Iraq. Bush’s identification with the war, and with the associated policies of unilateralism, preemptive strikes, and restrictions on civil liberties, polarized public opinion so effectively that little room was left for a third party. This polarization enabled the eventual Democratic nominee, John Kerry, to capture the antiwar vote even though he supported the war. Similarly, Kerry captured the pro-gay marriage vote even though he opposed gay marriage. For the moment, at least, there were no longer any salient issues that were not represented by the two-party system, and no appreciable number of voters who rejected both Bush and Kerry. Neither Nader, Cobb, nor any other minor party candidate had an impact on the outcome of the vote in any state.

Kerry might have gathered less support on the left had it not been for the unsuccessful campaign of Howard Dean in the Democratic primaries. Dean’s forthright stance against the war with Iraq revived left hopes that the Democratic party might be a vehicle for change, and made Dean himself the frontrunner for the Democratic nomination from early in the fall of 2003 through his defeat in the Iowa caucuses. Dean was aided by the progressive internet organization MoveOn.org, which first polled its members about which candidate to endorse, and then served as a focal point for independent pro-Dean campaign activity. These revived hopes and the sense of virtual camaraderie overcame many left activists’ distaste for Kerry’s issue positions, turning them away from both Nader and the Greens.

Thus the Green party found itself much closer to the situation of the People’s party in the 1890s after the victory of McKinley over William Jennings Bryan (except that the Green party was nowhere near as strong as the People’s party had been), rather than that of the abolitionist parties in the 1840s after the victory of Polk over Clay. While the Greens did not nominate the Democrat, they may as well have done so, for all the votes their candidate received. Their problem now is to find a way to maintain their viability as a party.

The Future of Progressive Electoral Politics

The last few years have seen anticapitalist and progressive electoral victories in a number of countries, most notably Venezuela. In the United States today, though, left electoral campaigns seem doomed to marginality. The Greens turned to Nader in 1996, and again 2000, hoping that a presidential campaign around a nationally prominent figure would bring them quick growth and put them onto the


national political stage. This strategy was temporarily successful; the Greens gained a great deal in membership, organizational capacity, and internal coherence after both the 1996 and 2000 elections. However, the strategy also put them in danger of being captives of Nader and Nader’s purposes. They managed to escape this captivity in the struggle of their endorsement and nomination in 2004, but in the process they also lost a good portion of the gains they had made during the 2000 campaign.

Nevertheless, the Greens are moving ahead. In 2006 there are Green statewide candidates — for governor, US senator, and other offices — in Arkansas, California, Colorado, Connecticut, Illinois, Indiana, Iowa, Maine, Maryland, Massachusetts, Minnesota, Missouri, Nebraska, Nevada, New York, Ohio, Oregon, Pennsylvania, Rhode Island, Tennessee, Texas, Utah, Washington, and Wisconsin. When local candidates are included, there are 305 Green candidates in 2006. This is fewer than in 2004 or 2002 (although those figures are year-end totals; there may still be more candidates in 2006), but more than in 2000.

However, the focus of progressive organizing has shifted away from electoral politics to issue-related organizing: the antiwar movement, the environmental movement, and, most recently, immigration reform. When they think about elections, most left activists hope that the Democrats will win back control of Congress in 2006, and will win the presidential election of 2008. The feeling that everyone must unite against George Bush seems likely to survive George Bush himself. It is likely, then that any new surge of anticapitalist or progressive electoral activity is at least 6 years away.


Bibliography


