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# Two's Company

Third-party candidates never win, and 2008 won't be any different.

**BY JOSHUA SPIVAK**
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With the news that he has dropped his Republican affiliation, New York City's Mayor Michael Bloomberg continues to play a public game of flirting with an independent presidential run. This meshes with the years-long speculation that a noted political figure, be it the self-financing Mr. Bloomberg or someone else, like the antiwar Republican Sen. Chuck Hagel, will jump into the 2008 presidential race with either an independent or third-party bid. Pundits argue that for a host of different reasons, such as the growth of Internet fund raising or the mood of the country or because of the impending death of the campaign finance system, now is the time that a third-party candidate has a chance of winning.

While this election may be different from its predecessors, we can be sure that it will not be because of a third-party victor. There is the same infinitesimal chance for a successful third-party run as there has been for nearly 100 years. And every smart politician knows this.

Third-party runs are important. As we've seen, they can make or break a presidential election. Everyone remembers Ralph Nader's three runs for the White House, especially his bid in 2000 that cost Al Gore the presidency. And Ross Perot might have fatally damaged George Bush when he collected 19% of the vote in 1992.

But while they may influence the vote, that does not mean they actually have a chance of winning. The last third-party candidate even to garner an Electoral College vote was Southern protest candidate George Wallace in 1968. And you have to go back to 1912 for the only time a third-party candidate ever came in as high as second in a race, when former President Teddy Roosevelt, who bolted from the Republicans and ran under the banner of the Progressive Party, received 88 electoral votes and 27% of the popular vote to beat out Republican William Howard Taft. Of course, Roosevelt finished a distant second in the race to Woodrow Wilson.

But these failures are only the tip of the iceberg for the third-party problems. In order to really get a hint of the difficulty that a third-party candidate faces, we need to drill down to the state and local levels, where there are few real third-party elected officials.

Outside of Sens. Joe Lieberman and Bernie Sanders--the latter a socialist who runs with the complete acquiescence of the Democratic Party--there are no third-party members in Congress. Mr. Lieberman's successful run is not indicative of a trend, as he was a popular incumbent whose campaign was greatly dependent on a most unlikely scenario--Republican voters (and especially party leaders) turning their back on their nominated candidate to support a Democrat. Similarly, while there are occasional third-party governors, such as Jesse Ventura in Minnesota, they usually win based on a particular quirk that is very specific to the state. They also generally turn out to be political shooting stars who, without the backing of a party, have a single relatively ineffective term in office and disappear without any real lasting impact.

To some degree, the problems for third parties are ingrained in the political system. Getting on the ballot is difficult in many states, requiring candidates to spend significant cash and effort just to have the opportunity to run. This is magnified on the national level, where candidates have to get on all 50 ballots to be viewed as a serious contender. Additionally, the Electoral College presents a high hurdle to success, as an independent must build a support network from scratch and run winning campaigns in what amount to 50 separate elections.

But there is an even larger practical problem for third-party candidates; one that frequently causes their downfall. The two political parties have ideologies that serve a real and very important function in an election.

Most voters do not follow the political process all that closely--for good reason, as they have jobs and lives. The parties therefore operate as signposts for a host of contentious issues. Just by looking at the candidate's party, voters are aware of the candidates' likely position on a diverse array of wedge issues. A third-party candidate may initially win support for a few exciting new ideas, such as Ross Perot's anti-free-trade positions, but voters start peeling off as the candidacy gets serious and the candidate is forced to reveal his stand on other controversial political problems.

Since third-party candidates must draw their support from disaffected voters in both parties, taking a stand on a hot-button issue like abortion or Social Security reform is likely to upset a number of voters on the other side of the political divide. Each unpopular stand pushes more voters away from the third-party candidates and back into the waiting arms of the voter's regular political party. By Election Day, the third-party candidate has long been written off, and can only hope to once again play the spoiler role.

Just as Mr. Bloomberg's latest move has once again sent the press into a flurry, over the next year we will undoubtedly hear about noted political figures contemplating third-party candidacies for the presidency, with pundits showing just how this candidate could be the one to break the two party system's hold on the White House. It's OK for them to talk. Just don't believe them.

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