

3rd Party Candidates Deserve More Respect

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Here's a fearless prediction: not only will Rhode Island's four Electoral College votes (out of a U.S. total of 538) go to the Democrats this November, few Rhode Islanders will vote for a party other than the Democrats or the GOP. And yet many voters don't support the Democrats' (or the Republicans') positions on foreign policy, the environment, and civil liberties, among many issues.

Many people aren't aware that in addition to Obama and Romney, there will be five other candidates on the presidential ballot. The incredible disparity in resources and media coverage between the big two and the "minor parties" guarantees that this is so. Sadly, the Obama dog, Bo, has better name recognition than Libertarian Gary Johnson or the Greens' Jill Stein.



The same applies to congressional races. We often hear about "the two candidates squaring off" in a debate, as if there were no others in the race. Not true. In Rhode Island's First Congressional District there is, of course, David Cicilline and Brendan Doherty, but also Independent David Vogel. In the Second Congressional District, the candidates are Democrat James Langevin, Republican Michael Riley, and the Green Party's Abel Collins. Small wonder that third parties have a hard time getting heard: in the Rhode Island congressional candidates' debates hosted by WPRI, Collins and Vogel have expressly been denied a chance to speak by station management. National debates are an even tougher nut to crack for the small parties. Green Party presidential candidate Jill Stein and her running mate, Cheri Honkala, were arrested the afternoon of the November 16 presidential debate at Long Island's Hofstra University. The reason? Trying to gain entrance to the debate grounds.

Even among voters aware that there are more than two choices, many don't want to "waste" their vote. Electoral College votes are awarded on a winner take all basis; even if 15 percent of Rhode Island voters were to mark the Green Party on their ballot, that would still translate into zero Electoral College votes. In battleground states, there is also the "spoiler" problem whereby a vote for the left-wing Justice Party could siphon votes from the Democrats and result in what, presumably, would be a Justice Party supporter's worst possible outcome: a Republican victory.

The U.S. Congress is equally unfriendly to small party candidates. It's a first-past-the-post system: the candidate with the most votes takes the seat. Makes sense, but in the aggregate it misrepresents the will of the electorate. If 10 percent of U.S. voters cast their ballot for the Libertarians, that will result in zero elected Libertarians, unless a Libertarian happens to prevail in a given district.

It's a curious situation -- those who don't vote are reproached for their lack of civic engagement, and those who do, but dare cast their ballot for a non-major party candidate, are assailed as naïve oddballs or accused of election "spoilage." A possible fix would be introducing an element of proportional representation into the electoral system. This would render every vote meaningful, not just those in battleground states. Further, the implementation of ranked choice voting (RCV) would counter the spoiler problem. RCV allows voters to number their preferences from a list, with votes being transferred from one candidate to another as the lowest vote getters are eliminated. Such a method prevents a vote for a third party inadvertently producing a voter's least desired result.

Rhode Island has a further perverse electoral aspect, the Soviet-like "straight ticket" option in which checking a box at the outset plugs in the Dems or Republicans for every office on the ballot. This practice, which is toxic to third parties and independent candidates, has been eliminated in most states, but persists here.

There's not much the individual voter can do on November 6 about the electoral system, but if "sending Washington a message" is what's needed, voting Democrat (or Republican) won't do it. Who is taking these messages? Do they write them down? Follow up on them? Haven't so far. And yet, many Rhode Islanders are so repulsed by the Republicans that they ritualistically vote Democrat, perhaps because they want to run up the score. Ah, the satisfaction: Democrats 70 percent, Republicans 30 percent. But it all counts the same, the Electoral College you know. And what are you getting for your support anyway? The Democrats are neck and neck with the Republicans in abetting Wall Street shenanigans and supporting U.S. militarism abroad. As for the spoiler issue, it's perhaps worth considering in Ohio or Florida, but not here; this is far from battleground territory.

I intend to waste, squander and otherwise fritter away my vote this November. I look at this way: every vote for a third party is at least meaningful to that party. If the Dems get 60 percent of the Rhode Island presidential vote instead of 65 percent, will they care? Will anybody? But if a third party goes from the low single digits to double digits in support, that lends it legitimacy and allows for further gains and influence on the process. Why short circuit that possibility before it's even had a chance?

Obama and Romney aren't the only game in town. Despite their exclusion from Presidential Debates, the non-major party contenders are not oddballs or vanity candidates, and each are advancing positions on healthcare, military spending, the Constitution, civil liberties and the environment which are embraced by millions of Americans, but not articulated by either the Democrats or the Republicans. Here they are in order of their appearance on the Rhode Island ballot: Gary Johnson, Libertarian Party (www.lp.org); Virgil Goode, Constitution Party (www.goodeforpresident2012.com); Ross C. "Rocky" Anderson, Justice Party

(www.justicepartyusa.org); Peta Lindsay, Socialism and Liberation Party (www.pslweb.org/votepsl/2012); and Jill Stein, Green Party (www.jillstein.org).