

US Green Party candidate Ralph Nader courts Buchanan supporters

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The US Green Party held its national convention in Denver, Colorado last weekend and nominated Ralph Nader as its presidential candidate in the 2000 elections. Nader, who ran as the Greens' candidate for president in 1996, won the backing of 295 of the 315 voting delegates attending the convention.

Several hundred people participated in the three-day convention. A large number were veterans of the anti-Vietnam War and anti-nuclear protests, with the vast majority well over the age of 40. At least 95 percent were white and most were professionals, including educational consultants, building contractors, software developers, teachers and college professors. Some were upper-middle-class and quite privileged, as in the case of a vice president of Chase Manhattan Bank with whom this reporter spoke.

Of the few college students attending, most described themselves as “activists,” including one from the New School of Social Research in New York City and another a leader of the United Students Against Sweatshops at the University of Kentucky. A number of delegates were associated with other parties, such as the Democratic Socialists of America, the Socialist Party, which merged with the Greens in Oregon, or groups affiliated to the US Labor Party, which maintains close relations with the Greens although most of its founding unions support Al Gore.

The delegates were for the most part disaffected Democrats, but one could also find former Republicans who had supported Senator John McCain's bid for the Republican nomination and were attracted to Nader's call for campaign finance reform.

The convention generated widespread coverage in the media. Over 200 reporters, including those from the television networks, CNN and major newspapers such as the *New York Times*, *Washington Post*, *Wall Street Journal*, and *Los Angeles Times* covered the event, giving Nader and the Greens generally favorable coverage.

Under conditions of widespread disaffection with both the Republican and Democratic candidates, Nader's standing in the opinion polls has improved. Last week he drew 7 percent in a nationwide NBC/ *Wall Street Journal* poll as well as a survey of California voters. Were this level of support to translate into votes in November, Nader could tip the balance in a series of tightly contested state races and affect the outcome of the national election. Spokesmen for presumptive Democratic candidate Al Gore have expressed particular concern.

Nader, 66, has a long association with the Democratic Party, beginning his career in the mid-1960s as a legal consultant on auto

safety issues for Daniel Patrick Moynihan, then the assistant secretary of labor. He gained a reputation as a consumer advocate and pressed for various reforms, including environmental protection and occupational health and safety standards.

Since the early 1990s he has allied himself with the AFL-CIO trade union leadership and other proponents of economic nationalism in campaigns against the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT) and the World Trade Organization.

In his acceptance speech, Nader made it clear that he was seeking the support not only of disaffected liberals repelled by the Democratic Party's shift to the right, but also middle class people and workers who have been attracted to right-wing forces such as the presumptive Reform Party presidential candidate Patrick Buchanan.

Nader's speech combined denunciations of the domination of “global corporate power over our government” and the economic insecurity facing small businessmen, farmers and workers with appeals to patriotism, so-called family values and economic nationalism. Nader declared that the Greens' aims—for a healthier environment, communities and people—were “conservative goals too,” and warned his supporters not to “prejudge” any voters. He added that the party should appeal to all those opposed to “the voyeurism of the mass media,” “the rejection of the wisdoms of our elders and forebears” and the misuse of tax dollars.

The Green Party candidate related an experience from his campaign, illustrating how he hopes to woo Buchanan supporters with appeals to “community-based economics and patriotism.” During a visit to Toledo, Ohio he provided legal support to a resident forced to relocate his home to make room for a new DaimlerChrysler auto plant. Nader noted approvingly that this worker, who had fought the Germans in World War II, expressed outrage that the American government was forcing him to move to accommodate a German multinational corporation.

For all of Nader's references to the concentration of wealth and political power in the hands of an “oligarchy,” the Green candidate only advanced a series of mildly reformist proposals, including campaign finance reform, increased taxation of the wealthy, an end to “corporate welfare” and legal efforts to withdraw state corporate charters from companies that violated environmental and labor standards.

He concluded with an appeal to the enlightened self-interest of the “contented classes in America,” saying they were the “citizens

who can give voice to the powerless and the beleaguered to improve their conditions.” History, Nader said, showed that when corporations “shared power with the people they oppressed and excluded,” they “prospered more.”

Throughout the convention, in numerous speeches, public appearances and press conferences, Nader repeated the theme that the corporate “takeover” of the two-party “duopoly” threatened the democratic rights of the American people. But when challenged to take a position on key questions of democratic rights, he was unwilling to take a stand that might alienate the more right-wing forces he is seeking to attract to his campaign.

At a noontime press conference on June 25, in response to a question by this reporter, Nader stated his unequivocal support for last year's impeachment drive against Bill Clinton, and expressed disappointment that the Senate had not voted to remove him from office. Nader was oblivious to the threat to democratic rights embodied in the campaign of extreme right-wing forces to remove an elected president from office, using a sex scandal as the legal pretext. He likewise ignored Independent Counsel Kenneth Starr's trampling of civil liberties and due process. Instead he characterized the highly partisan impeachment of Clinton by the Republican-controlled House of Representatives as a “thorough trial,” adding cynically, “He had a whole host of Democrats. He had his legal advocates—the best lawyers that money can buy.”

Nader's support for the impeachment campaign aligns him with Christian fundamentalist groups, right-wing multimillionaires and the most reactionary elements in Congress and the judiciary, and in opposition to the overwhelming majority of the American people, who indicated first in opinion polls and then in the 1999 congressional elections their deep disquiet over the tactics of the Starr probe and their suspicion that behind the impeachment campaign lay profoundly antidemocratic forces.

Nader's embrace of the anti-Clinton sex scandal is noteworthy as well because it flies in the face of an amendment to his own party's Platform 2000, which states the following: “It is the position of the Green Party that sexual activity conducted among consenting adults in private shall not be the basis for any form of criminal prosecution, discrimination, or other negative treatment by any state, local or federal government.”

At the same press conference, a questioner from the New York Green Party pointed out that Nader had not traveled last week to Huntsville, Texas to oppose the execution of Gary Graham. He asked if Nader would make a statement denouncing the state killing of Graham and whether he supported the call for a new trial for political prisoner Mumia Abu-Jamal and the release of framed American Indian Movement leader Leonard Peltier.

Nader refused to make such a statement and sidestepped the question, saying there were many abuses of justice, and “There just isn't enough time to keep focusing in an important way on each one...”

That Nader is tailoring his campaign to reach potential Buchanan voters was underscored by comments made by an official from Nader's camp in the presence of this reporter. The official predicted that Buchanan would be the “first to break the truce” between the two third-party candidates.

When this reporter asked the official about this truce, he replied

that while there was no written pact, Nader and Buchanan had worked together since the anti-NAFTA campaign in the early 1990s, and that there was a “mutual agreement” not to criticize one another. Nader has, in fact, refrained from attacking Buchanan's right-wing positions on abortion and immigration, and remained silent on Buchanan's long-standing ties to anti-labor textile bosses in the South.

Both men have joined with the Teamsters union leadership in the latter's racist campaign against the entry of Mexican truck drivers into the US, as well as the anti-Chinese campaign to oppose normalization of trade with Beijing.

Asked about his opposition to NAFTA by a Canadian reporter, Nader said Mexican workers threatened the jobs and living standards of American workers. Speaking to the camera crews at one press conference, he asked, “How would you like to be replaced by Mexican camera crews making \$10 a day?”

Nader's attempt to combine certain reform proposals with an increasingly rightward political trajectory was in keeping with the general outlook of the Green Party leadership, which displayed throughout the convention an overweening desire to be accepted by the media as a legitimate party. The Greens' efforts to be part of the political “mainstream” underscore the highly superficial character of the organization's independence from the Democratic Party.

In fact, the party is largely seen by its own leaders and members as a tool for placing pressure on the Democrats and shifting them to the left. Many delegates told this reporter they hoped a growing vote for the Greens, and a growing number of Green officeholders, would serve as a “catalyst” to influence the two big business parties.

Dean Myerson, the convention coordinator, summed up this general orientation, saying the meeting “would launch us to a new level of influence on the political system by demonstrating to the nation the quality and seriousness of the Green Party.”



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