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Running on empty

Ralph Nader plans to announce this month whether he'll be running for president in 2004. Some believe that such a campaign is needed to make a strong political statement nationwide. But if Nader does run this year, what kind of support – in the form of volunteers, resources and votes – could he reasonably expect?

Results of a nationwide survey, released in late December, provide a stark look at the current inclinations of people who've been part of his electoral base. After receiving about 11,000 responses from readers on a core e-mail list, the progressive online magazine AlterNet reported back: "While 27 percent of you voted for Nader in 2000, only 11 percent say you would vote for him in 2004."

This year, Nader would be lucky to receive 1 million votes – a far cry from his 2000 total of 2.8 million.

Dire as the AlterNet numbers are for a prospective Nader run, they probably overstate the extent to which he would retain voters from 2000. The survey tally came before Nader publicly ruled out being a Green Party nominee in 2004. Last time, one of the main reasons given for supporting Nader as the Green presidential candidate was a desire to build a truly progressive party. This year, many who buy such reasoning may opt for the Green Party's presidential candidate rather than get behind an independent Nader campaign.

Hours before Nader made public his decision not to seek the Green Party's nomination in 2004, the national coordinator of the Independent Progressive Politics Network, Ted Glick, commented in an essay: "It is hard for me to see how such a decision would work for Nader." Glick went on: "Who does he expect to attract to an independent campaign other than Greens? I know of no moves to leave the Democratic Party on the part of any bloc of Blacks, Latinos, labor, women or any other progressive constituency. The Reform Party is virtually defunct. I assume Ralph is not going to try to attract large numbers of disaffected Republican conservatives as his petition gatherers and organization builders. Who else is there?"

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If he goes ahead for 2004, Ralph Nader will be in conflict with countless allies who have stood alongside him in many battles – including his previous presidential campaigns. Unlike the Democratic Party loyalists who attacked him (often with cheap shots) in the mainstream media during 2000, many people who now oppose a Nader campaign in 2004 have no allegiance to the Democrats and do not shrink from confronting corporate power or espousing principled yet unpopular causes.

Eight years ago, I spoke at a news conference in California supporting the launch of Nader's presidential campaign. Four years ago, in venues including national TV and radio, I criticized the sparse quantity and defamatory quality of mainstream media coverage of his 2000 presidential campaign. This year, I have no intention of supporting Nader if he runs.

The prospect of a Nader-in-2004 campaign is enticing to relatively few people. "I see no evidence of the 1995 and 1999 groundswells that drew Nader into presidential politics twice," Micah Sifry wrote in December 2003. A longtime observer and analyst of third-party movements, Sifry is also on target when he explodes the myth that a presidential campaign necessarily brings a focus on issues: "Hope is not a plan. The Libertarian Party nominates a presidential candidate every four years, but that doesn't get its issues onto the agenda."

Along with the clearly diminished support for a Nader run this year, a parallel question also looms: How would such a campaign help to defeat George W. Bush?

While Nader may talk about opening up a second front against Bush, there is no plausible scenario where a Nader candidacy actually increases the likelihood of a Bush defeat. At best, a Nader campaign would have no effect on whether Bush loses. And the fact remains that a presidential campaign by Nader – who has vocally rejected the idea of campaigning only in "safe states" – could help Bush win.

Like it or not, in 2004 the only candidate who can serve as an electoral tool for ousting Bush from the White House will be the Democratic nominee. The imperative of dislodging him requires that we build a broad coalition to vote Bush out.

Progressives have ample reasons to be angry at a Democratic Party leadership that has betrayed its mass constituencies on war, civil liberties, trade, economic justice and other issues. But while such emotions can and should fuel the engine of political transformations, rage should not be at the steering wheel.

Right now, for progressive Americans, the principal enemy is the gang led by the likes of Bush, Dick Cheney and Karl Rove. There's an apt saying attributed to an ancient Chinese military strategist: "In a struggle with your enemy, don't do what you most want to do. Do what he least wants you to do." And right now, what the Bush-Cheney-

Rove gang least wants to see is a united front to turn them out of office.

For generations of Americans, it is not hyperbolic to say that this administration is by far the worst in their lifetimes. As bad as the Democratic Party hierarchy continues to be, the right-wing Republicans now in power are a significant order of magnitude worse – whether the realm is militarism abroad or civil liberties at home.

Consider a recent statement by Joel Kovel, a former Green Party candidate for senator from New York: "Tens of millions of people, including a lot of radicals, believe that Bush's men are moving to rip up the Constitution and fundamentally restructure the American republic to destroy the slim chance of democratic renewal upon which green electoral politics, along with much else, rests."

Kovel's point goes to the reality of conditions that would be faced by a presidential campaign offering any would-be progressive alternative in 2004, whether Nader or whoever. After noting a few of the policies implemented with a vengeance by the Bush regime, Kovel wrote: "These are qualitative shifts, the way quantitative changes become qualitative after a while, then create new configurations. It is very weak reasoning to point out how awful the Democrats are, how corporate, etc., and neglect to realize that a rogue faction of the ruling class, represented by the Bushies, can break loose even from the traditional Republican party, and set out to change the fundamental structures themselves. That is how republics can turn into dictatorships. Will it happen? Well, I don't know; nobody does. Is it more likely now than ever before? Oh yes, yes, and will become even more so if Bush gets in again."

A 2004 strategy that focuses on voting Bush out should not mean the left folds into the Democratic Party. Progressives ought to be clear about what's wrong with the party's nominee and platform while acting on the dire need to rid the world of President Bush.

A position of independence should guide political activism that steadfastly opposes pro-corporate policies whether they come out of a Republican or Democratic White House. This year, Nader could play a major constructive role in consolidating and mobilizing a progressive base for the years ahead. Imagine Nader-led super rallies aimed at retiring Bush while building independent political power on the left.

The regime of George W. Bush has made a compelling case for an imperative: He must not return to the White House for another term in January 2005. And we have a responsibility to see that he doesn't.

Does Ralph Nader sufficiently grasp such concerns in 2004? For several decades, he demonstrated enormous strategic savvy. Hopefully, he has not become tone deaf at this pivotal moment in history. We'll soon find out. ●