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## The Green Party gets serious

**Intent on becoming a viable third party, the Greens are supplementing their grassroots efforts with a dose of political savvy**

by Seth Gitell

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DENVER, COLORADO -- Anyone expecting a granola fest at this past weekend's Green Party presidential nominating convention would have been disappointed. Sure, there were plenty of Birkenstock-clad conventioners, but they were overshadowed by those shod in wingtips and loafers. If this convention was about anything, it was about sartorial image. There were suits on the presidential candidate. Suits on the candidate's aides. And suits on the advance people.

Advance people? Yep. This isn't your groovy mother's Green Party. This political movement, which grew out of the grassroots anti-nuke environmental activism of the 1980s, is maturing as it grapples with global trade policies and political reform. The Green presence at last fall's Seattle protests against the World Trade Organization boosted the party's public profile. And when party leaders, including members of presidential candidate Ralph Nader's campaign, know they need to dress in suits and employ advance people, that says as much about where the Greens are going as the party's platform and policy positions.

The organizers of the Association of US Green Parties (ASGP) convention clearly set out to put a new face on their brand of progressive politics. The controversial decision to hold the convention in the tony Renaissance Hotel -- with its Brasserie Restaurant, glass elevators, and space to host the national press corps (which included CNN, NBC, the *New York Times*, the *Los Angeles Times*, and the *Washington Post*) -- was a deliberate break with Green tradition. And the convention, which drew 2000 delegates and supporters, even featured a slick five-minute movie featuring catchy music and photos of Nader in his early days.

That's not to say the Greens are all about style sans substance: the Green Party is on the brink of a major growth spurt at the local and national levels, and both mainstream political parties would be foolish to ignore it. Unlike other US third parties -- and even, to an extent, the Republican

Party in Massachusetts -- the Greens are hustling to turn themselves into a credible alternative by running candidates for elective office across the country. "Our sustainability as a long-term party will depend on the municipal level," explains Ross Mirkarimi, the convention's smooth media coordinator.

At a pre-convention press conference designed to showcase some of these local Green politicians, Mirkarimi introduced Michael Feinstein, a Santa Monica city councilor. Both Mirkarimi and Feinstein were impeccably dressed -- Feinstein sported a blue suit and yellow power tie, with his long hair pulled back into a tight ponytail. "We're showing the credibility of people in office who show they can govern," Feinstein said. The numbers tell the story: in 1996, the Greens had 43 elected officeholders; today that number is near 80. The Reform Party, by contrast, lists just eight officials nationwide, and their highest-ranking one -- Minnesota governor Jesse Ventura -- abandoned the party. The sparsely attended press conference -- the press cares about Nader only as a November spoiler -- also featured Elizabeth Horton Sheff, an African-American city councilor from Hartford, Connecticut; Art Goodtimes, a county commissioner in Colorado; Julie Jacobson, a member of Hawaii's county council; and Gail Dixon, a member of the Washington, DC, Board of Education.

An even bigger sign of credibility is that Nader's Green Party effort is fueled with political veterans -- most of them refugees from the liberal wing of the Democratic Party. Steve Cobble, the former delegate director of Jesse Jackson's 1988 presidential effort, serves as Nader's informal strategist. Steven Schmidt, an aide to Michael Dukakis in 1988 and a former senior adviser to Jerry Brown's 1992 presidential campaign, worked as the chairman of the platform committee. Nader and the Greens aren't fooling around this year; they hope to build on the unexpected success that both Jackson and Brown had when they ran. Jackson won close to a third of the primary vote in Pennsylvania, Oregon, and California, and won some Southern states outright; Brown won Connecticut and shaped the public debate during the summer months of his campaign.

The Greens may never be as successful as they've been in Germany, where the party was once synonymous with angry protests against the placement of American missiles and where Joscha Fischer, a Green Party member, is now foreign minister. To be sure, Germany's system of parliamentary politics makes it easier for marginal parties to succeed than America's two-party system does. Nevertheless, Ralph Nader figures he'll draw support from voters fed up with Al Gore and George W. Bush -- and the parties they represent. He may also get a boost next month, when activists sympathetic with Green Party principles try to embarrass the two major parties at their conventions in Philadelphia and Los Angeles.

Perhaps the most newsworthy aspect of all this is that none of it -- from the dress of the party aides to the venue of the convention to the party platform -- happened by accident. While the Reform Party has devolved into chaotic internal feuding, the Green Party has been quietly planning for its moment -- and this may be it.

"WE HAVE a complex strategy," explains John Rensenbrink, a professor of political science and ecology at Bowdoin College, in Maine. Rensenbrink, who founded the Maine Green Party, is considered one godfather of the movement in America. Rensenbrink relates, in abbreviated form,

the chronicle that makes up the bulk of his 1999 book *Against the Odds: The Green Transformation of American Politics* (Leopold Press). During the first part of their history -- from 1984 to 1990 -- the Greens concentrated on building local groups that would focus on energy waste sites, nuclear development, and tenants' rights. Beginning in the 1990s, the Greens entered the electoral realm, running for municipal offices in California and New Mexico. Then, in 1996, the Green Party put forward Nader for the first time. "This year Nader is a better candidate. He's connecting with our basic themes," says Rensenbrink. "If he gets us five percent of the vote, which is not unlikely, we will be in a new situation." Indeed. If Nader pulls five percent of the vote in November, the Green Party will be eligible for about \$13 million in federal matching campaign funds.

Nader just might pull it off. And if he does, he can thank Bill Clinton. The Green Party would not be where it is today without the rightward shift taken by the Democratic Party in 1992. Clinton's election as a "New Democrat" -- a pro-business centrist -- provided an opening further to the left, in much the same way that the GOP's seeming moderation has advanced the Christian Coalition and groups further to the right. The Clinton administration is a steadfast supporter of free trade, anathema to labor and other progressives. Clinton lobbied hard to get the North Atlantic Free Trade Agreement passed, and, more recently, pushed through permanent normal trade relations with China.

Clinton has also placed fundraising at the center of the Democratic agenda. The excesses of this system -- as has been exhaustively reported -- have alienated many voters, whom Green Party strategists hope to lure to their party. To do this requires emphasizing Green Party principles that speak to American voters while downplaying those that would make the Greens seem like a nutty movement ready to declare it "Year One" as soon as they got into power. Hence the suits, the Renaissance Hotel, and the presence of Steve Schmidt.

Schmidt's official job was to act as chair of the platform committee of the ASGP convention. Unofficially, his job involved forging a platform that Nader could run on. He took 18 months to craft just such a platform -- one that emphasizes labor rights, health care, and campaign-finance reform. Perhaps his most significant success, however, was organizing things in such a way that when delegates came to Denver to debate the platform, there was little they could do to change what was presented to them.

Schmidt, a youthful 51, worked on Jerry Brown's 1976 presidential campaign. In 1988, he joined Dennis Thomson -- then Dukakis's deputy chief of staff -- on the Dukakis presidential effort. In 1992 he became a senior adviser to Jerry Brown's campaign. It's all but forgotten now, but in 1992, Clinton's most energetic challenge late in the campaign came from Brown, not Paul Tsongas, who quickly faded after Florida. Brown developed a populist appeal with the "Take Back America" platform crafted by Schmidt, who says he wanted to focus on running a campaign based on "comprehensive political reform." And he learned a lesson even more important than the need to build a broadly appealing platform. Near the height of Brown's popularity in the campaign, *New York Times* columnist A.M. Rosenthal asked the candidate how he thought he could govern given the amount of criticism he had leveled at Congress. Brown answered that Congress was ungovernable. Political pundits and the media immediately took the answer as a sign that Brown was not a serious candidate. "The mistake in that campaign was,

when we were the frontrunner, not stepping up to the level of credibility we needed," Schmidt recalls. It's a mistake he vows he won't make again. "Getting leverage and not being marginalized are part of our strategy," he says.

Soon after Clinton secured the nomination in 1992, Schmidt approached Ron Brown, then the head of the Democratic National Committee, to discuss policy. Schmidt urged him to embrace campaign-finance reform. The Democrats could never get nationwide health-insurance reform or achieve anything else of substance without taking money out of the political system, Schmidt said. Not surprisingly, Ron Brown, a fundraiser par excellence, rebuffed Schmidt. The rest, as they say, is history. The Democratic Party moved right, and Schmidt joined the Greens.

In 1994, Schmidt ran for lieutenant governor in New Mexico as a Green Party member. He lost. Undaunted, he took the ideas that had been at the center of Jackson's presidential effort in 1988 and Jerry Brown's in 1992 and made that the basis for the New Mexico Green Party platform. By December 1994, Schmidt was working with Green Party members in California to launch a major presidential effort based on a serious platform. In 1996, the Greens met at the University of New Mexico to strategize for the presidential effort. The group came up with a shortlist of candidates for president that included Jim Hightower and Ralph Nader. Hightower remained a Democrat; Nader agreed to let the Greens put his name on the ballot.

The ensuing campaign was a disaster. Although Nader was on the ballot in 21 states, he didn't campaign for office and garnered only one percent of the vote. Green Party insiders attribute this to lack of time and resources and insist this year will be different. And so far, it has been. One reason is that Schmidt has been joined by Steve Cobble, who is volunteering his services as a political strategist for Nader.

Cobble got his start with the 1972 McGovern campaign -- the same one that Clinton worked on. Now a political consultant in Arlington, Virginia, Cobble made his political reputation as a top aide to Jesse Jackson in 1988. As Jackson's delegate coordinator, Cobble figured out how to get the candidate the most delegates -- and clout -- at the '88 Democratic convention. One particularly well-known victory for Cobble came with the Texas delegates. Although Dukakis won the Texas primary, Jackson won its caucuses, giving the two candidates virtual parity in delegates. Cobble was impressed with the way Jackson reached beyond blacks to progressive whites, union members, and working-class people to form his coalition. "It was a much broader quilt than anyone would have thought," he says.

It's such a coalition that Cobble and Schmidt now hope to put together for Nader. The Greens want to build on some of the successes of Jackson, Brown, and even Ross Perot and Senator John McCain. The Nader campaign plans to target young people, the independents who came out in such large numbers for McCain, and the eight million people who voted for Perot in 1996. With Buchanan now the presumptive Reform Party head, the Nader people see that party as having moved too far to the right to appeal as a credible third-party alternative.

The goal now is to get Nader into the political debates, which currently restrict participants to those polling at least 15 percent of the vote. The Boston law firm Palmer & Dodge is representing Nader in a lawsuit against the Federal Election Commission challenging the

corporate sponsorship of presidential debates. If Nader succeeds, he could become a vehicle for American disgust with the two-party system, à la Jesse Ventura.

"The more the two parties are driven by money, the more mainstream turf that's ready to be occupied by a new leader or new party," Cobble says. "With globalization and campaign finance, it's easier now to be a new voice and be mainstream at the same time. A vast number of Americans are not being represented on these issues. You can write a Green Party platform that is mainstream in America."

The Green Party platform that passed in Denver reflects this. The first section calls for a "real reform, accountability, and responsiveness in government." The platform lays out key areas of focus -- democracy, economic justice and labor rights, human rights, health care, and the environment. Though all these sections are far more left-leaning than anything to be found in the Democratic or Republican platforms, there is language aimed at the solidly middle class. For example: "we acknowledge the many challenges responsible SMALL BUSINESS must overcome to remain competitive with big business."

By Monday, June 26, it became clear that the Green Party and Nader had accomplished many of the convention's goals. CNN had broadcast a report on Nader's nomination, focusing on the challenge it posed to the two major parties and Nader's push to participate in debates. Writing in the *New York Times*, Michael Janofsky led with Nader's "blistering attack against Republicans, Democrats, Congress, corporate America and the commission that sets the rules of presidential debates." In the *Boston Globe*, Yvonne Abraham quoted Nader attacking "the Bush and Gore duopoly."

Most press reports focused on the supposed corruption of the two-party system...

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