

GREEN PARTIES: REFLECTIONS ON THE FIRST THREE DECADES

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THE FOUNDING U.S. GREEN PLATFORM AND FIRST PRESIDENTIAL CAMPAIGN

By STEVEN J SCHMIDT

The years 1984–1994, the first decade of Green political party formation in the U.S., were as tumultuous as they were promising. Green environmentalism and social activism from the 1960s and 1970s had produced a wellspring of support for green causes. Social reform activists explored links between environmental sustainability and social justice. Deep ecology, bioregionalism and local community organizing, organic agriculture and alternative development, clean air and energy independence were among the many branches of Green political thought that flourished. Drawing on many threads of Green organizing to build a “Green” political party was a natural progression that began in the late 1980s.

The Rainbow Coalition of Jesse Jackson's 1988 presidential campaign was, as some described it, the first Green national electoral effort that focused on bringing together a broad-based coalition of voters concerned primarily with social justice and environmental issues. Jerry Brown's 1992 “We the People/Take Back America” campaign adopted many themes from the Rainbow platform and ran a historically significant and competitive race against Bill Clinton, finishing a close second after winning the Connecticut primary but losing in New York after Governor Brown chose Jesse Jackson to be his vice presidential running mate. Greens were a prominent part of the Brown campaign, helping to draft the campaign's platform and shaping much of the campaign's effort to reach out and pull together a broad coalition that would substantially impact policy at the federal, state and local levels. The reform platform of the Brown campaign was presented at the Democratic party platform hearings but was quickly set aside by the party, which, under the influence of the

assurgent Democratic Leadership Council, chose to move to the right in an effort to appeal to so-called Reagan Democrats.¹

The rightward slide of the Democrats and subsequent rise of the Republican party in federal, state, and local races can be traced to the Democratic party's 1992 shift in direction away from traditional grassroots and progressive policy goals that date back to Franklin Roosevelt's presidency.²

One of the principal goals of the Brown campaign focused on energizing a broad base of electoral support among progressives, fiscal liberals and forward-leaning conservatives. The platform envisioned the formation of many issue and policy-oriented coalitions. One such coalition was the "Blue-Green" alliance that the campaign worked to build between blue-collar supporters and environmental and community activists around common-ground issues such as the World Trade Organization and the North American Free Trade Agreement. Many Greens who were not active in the electoral arena began to glimpse the potential of a Green political party that would draw together many shades of green to form a powerful influence and direct the growing current of Green activism, electoral efforts and organizing.

At the national level, a nascent Green party organization, The Greens/Green Party USA (G/GPUSA) had about 1,000 dues-paying members by 1993–94. After a controversial vote the previous year at a Green national gathering in Elkins, West Virginia, the G/GPUSA organization was formally established in 1992 at a meeting in Minnesota at Augsburg College. It quickly became evident that support for the G/GPUSA would be limited by its program, its organizational structure, and the anti-electoral tendencies of Left-Green "vanguardism." The organization's structure, as described in many commentaries, was the product of prolonged and often acrimonious struggles that characterized G/GPUSA prior to 1996.

G/GPUSA's ideological underpinnings were revealed in the minutes of the 1992 meeting which established the organization's name, bylaws and working guidelines. Left-Green Network (LGN) proposals put forward by Charlie Betz, Don Fitz and Howie Hawkins were adopted by attendees, few of whom supported electoral efforts. The G/GPUSA model consisted of a dues-paying membership organization in which voting was limited under a structure of rules, mandates and other strictures. Central to the organizing model was a belief that dues-paying activist members would, in effect, be the grassroots of the organization and would

act to oversee state Green parties, candidates and campaigns. The G/GPUSA organization appealed to few Greens and quickly became insular and acrimonious. Meetings were infamous for strident disagreements, with various members employing consensus decision-making or invoking list and voting irregularities as a way of blocking proposals they found disagreeable. By the mid-1990s the G/GPUSA had shrunk to a core group of members, local groups and a few affiliated state Green parties as few U.S. Greens chose to join the organization, pay dues or agree to adhere to its bylaws, rules and working guidelines.

However, because the G/GPUSA controlled the Green name and claimed to be the "original and authentic" national Green party, any move toward a more broad-based party willing to engage in electoral politics would prove difficult. Activist members had been given extraordinary oversight powers and blocked efforts to restructure the organization. G/GPUSA activists could order state parties and each other into dispute resolution and require explicit affirmations from candidates, as attempts were made to maintain membership oversight. Grievance tribunals came and went. Mandates and binding mediation under threat of sanction were common and any active member of the party could mount a grievance and demand accountability of candidates, campaigns, state parties or Green party officeholders and representatives. Activist members defined themselves as party's "grassroots," and the rules, bylaws, working guidelines and practices of the G/GPUSA were extensions of this core organizational belief.

G/GPUSA adopted a national program which it described as a manifesto of the Green movement, though little attention was given to local governance, domestic or foreign policy. Electoral-oriented Greens recognized that the G/GPUSA program was not intended to be a platform on which Green political campaigns could effectively run. The program was much more a visionary expression of the ideological goals of numerous factions within the G/GPUSA and activist members often expressed disfavor toward policies which they perceived as "reformist" or "liberal." Greens seeking to run for office would regularly encounter activist members who insisted that candidates report to them, a dictate that was justified by their somewhat puritanical model of grassroots democracy. The members' oversight model, unsurprisingly, produced few G/GPUSA candidates or campaigns and most Green campaigns from 1992 to 1996 ran separate from the G/GPUSA organization, although the organization subsequently

attempted to claim them in a failed Federal Election Committee filing for national committee status in 1996.

By late 1994, the contradictions and failures of the G/GPUSA model had become apparent to many U.S. Greens. Individual state parties and Greens took on the challenge of envisioning and building a viable Green party distinct from the machinations and failures of the G/GPUSA. The New Mexico Green Party was a leader in this effort, as were those of Maine, California, Hawaii, Alaska and several others. According to the political scientist and long-time Green party organizer, John Rensenbrink, the Green Politics Network (GPN) was established as an alternative vision to that of G/GPUSA.³ After the 1992 G/GPUSA formation in Minnesota, Rensenbrink and many others had begun talking about a different vision and definition of Green politics, hoping to create a broader political formation. The Maine group, led by Rensenbrink, advanced a triad model that would combine electoral, educational and movement work.

A number of Greens advocated establishing a federation of state Green parties as an inclusive, far-reaching way to build a U.S. Green party. A resolution to this effect was proposed by New Mexico Greens at the 1996 national Green meeting in Los Angeles, even as debates waged as to how to deal with G/GPUSA's member oversight model and its legacy.

The challenge was to construct a successful model on which to build a growing, vital, U.S. Green party. The model adopted came from an unlikely place: a small state in the hinterland far from centers of power. In 1994 in Santa Fe, named after St. Francis of Assisi, the patron saint of the land and animals, the New Mexico Green party proposed a statewide slate of Green candidates that would run a serious and credible campaign based on their founding platform. The campaign was one of the most successful independent, third-party efforts in the United States in nearly four decades and became a model for the national Green "40-State Organizing Effort" launched in December 1994, which led to the founding of the national Green platform and the first presidential campaign in 1996.

NEW BEGINNINGS

A meeting in California between myself as a New Mexico Green and Mike Feinstein and Greg Jan of the California Greens, set in motion both the presidential campaign and a 40-state nationwide

organizing effort by Greens in 1995–96. California's Green party was the largest state Green party and the state's Green primary election was crucial to a successful Green presidential campaign and related party building at the state and local levels. I brought with me a resolution I had written that had been passed by the New Mexico Green Council after the November 1994 election. It called on the California party to make its 1996 primary ballot line available to a Green presidential candidate and presented the elements of a national organizing campaign based on the New Mexico model. The resolution became a core element of a subsequent national organizing drive to place a Green presidential and vice presidential candidate on 40 state ballots.

The statewide 1994 New Mexico Green campaign presented a convincing case that a "serious, credible, platform-based" campaign could be exported as a successful party building model. As a former senior adviser to the 1992 Brown presidential campaign who had proposed and participated in drafting the campaign's "We the People" platform, I realized that a national Green campaign would advance key progressive positions that the Democratic party had set aside in its Clinton-era move to take back the South and recapture the votes of Reagan Democrats.

State ballot access laws were a profound impediment to any independent challenge to Democrat/Republican dominance of U.S. elections. Nevertheless, in 1994 Roberto Mondragon and I waged a campaign for Governor and Lieutenant Governor in which we managed to capture 11 percent of the vote. The New Mexico Green party had, as a result, gained ballot standing as a "major" party, the first "minor" party in New Mexico's history to achieve this ballot standing.

The 40-state organizing proposal I drafted outlined a party-building model that focused on creating a serious, credible, platform-based presidential campaign. It also proposed a presidential nominating convention to be held in California and a plan to build the Green party at the state and local levels through ballot access and petitioning drives. The presidential campaign would be a catalyst in building the party across states and localities. Greens would be contacted and mobilized and the 40-state effort would reach out to environmentalists, social justice activists, labor organizations, students, community groups, and small and mid-sized business—much like the broad-based coalition that had been mobilized by the Jackson and Brown campaigns. Various Greens began the work of identifying and polling contacts in

every state to assess support for the 40-state effort and the new model for building a Green party nationally and at the state and local levels.

Our next generation "Take Back America" message was designed to speak to independents who now, according to polls, made up nearly 30 percent of the American electorate. I spoke of drafting a platform that would stand in opposition to corporate influence, militaristic post-Cold War doctrine and Democrat-Republican hegemony. We would advance ideals and ideas that would not otherwise be part of the national debate during the 1996 elections. We would present a stark contrast to the Republicans and Democrats, who were respectively moving toward neo-conservative and neo-liberal positions aimed at furthering globalization and transnational corporate dominance. In 1994, in a historic shift of political power, a wave of electoral victories led to Republican party control of Congress for the first time in 50 years. Led by House Speaker Newt Gingrich, the resurgent Republicans emphasized evangelicalism, social conservatism and a renewed military buildup. Gingrich's "Contract with America," an extension of Reagan's social and economic agenda, persuaded key Democrats to abandon long-held policies such as the right to universal health care. Democrats also attempted to elicit greater corporate contributions even as insurance and health care proposals were devastated by these same contributors.

The extent of lobbying and the amount of money influencing American politics reached unprecedented levels. The Center for Voting and Democracy, a non-partisan organization that studies how voting systems effect political participation, revealed the extent that repressive policies, laws and election codes blocked access to those outside the Republican/Democrat "duopoly." Americans were increasingly alienated from the two-party system, and the Greens' challenge was to mount an independent campaign within a winner-take-all system. In order to achieve this, the Green party looked for new ways, such as instant run-off voting, to confront the system of politics-as-usual.

The Democratic Leadership Council continued to push the Democratic party to the right in the 1990s even as the Democrat's adoption of Republican policies relegated the party to the backbench. Voters would soon see a new conservative Democratic party and an emerging neo-Republican era. Republicans effectively moved to consolidate control of the political agenda as Democratic opposition retreated. The shape of U.S. domestic

and foreign policy over the coming decade were set in place as Democrats adopted core Republican party positions and each party accelerated their outreach to corporate and conservative interests.

Against a background of rightward-shifting U.S. politics, the U.S. Green Party launched a vigorous effort to create an alternative vision to “Republi-crat” politics. It was increasingly evident that a serious challenge to two-party dominance of American politics was vital to any redirection in American politics. If the Green party was to enter the political arena as a serious, credible challenge to the politics-as-usual, it was also evident it would first have to confront its own politics.

At the 1995 national Green gathering in Albuquerque, New Mexico, the discord between the membership-based G/GPUSA organization and state parties like New Mexico and California had reached a tipping point. A G/GPUSA caucus attempt to “nominate” Mumia Abu Jamal, a convicted felon on death row, and mandate that state parties place Mumia’s name on their respective state ballots, was criticized and eventually defeated by the state parties. The bylaws and rules of the G/GPUSA were subsequently challenged and, after the New Mexico gathering, the G/GPUSA organization could no longer purport to be the legitimate national Green party. The following year the U.S. Federal Election Commission rejected a controversial G/GPUSA effort to establish a Green National Committee, thus effectively ending its attempted control of the party. This 1995 split in the Green party set the stage for the 1996 presidential campaign and the formation of the Association of State Green Parties.

At the 1995 New Mexico gathering in the *Great Kiva*, a traditional Native American place of reflection and decision-making, the assembled Greens heard the results of a national survey which strongly supported running a presidential campaign in 1996. The three presenters of the “40-State Organizing Proposal” were myself, Mike Feinstein and Greg Jan, and we spoke of a short list of potential candidates. We suggested Greens consider three prominent progressives: Jim Hightower, a well-known Texas populist and nationally respected writer, labor advocate and radio personality; Delores Huerta, a Latina activist from California who had worked on environmental and social justice issues since the Caesar Chavez-led campaigns of the 1960s and 1970s; and Ralph Nader, the incorrigible campaigner for consumer causes

who had taken on corporations and Congressional barter in the name of a revitalized civic democracy.

The assembled Greens voted to support the Green's 40-state organizing effort and presidential campaign, and shortly thereafter a series of meetings were held to discuss the national organizing plan. A key part of the process would be navigating the intricate and restrictive ballot access laws in each of the states. In this respect, Richard Winger, the editor of *Ballot Access News*, became an indispensable resource. Filing dates and petition requirements were sent to organizers in every state.

At the same time, a platform process was set in motion. With the assistance of Santa Fe Greens, I began approaching Greens from around the U.S., drawing together statements to begin the extended work of drafting policy positions that would serve as a founding document for the Green party and act as a foundation for the first presidential campaign. In creating a platform, we were inspired by many democratic movements and documents. These included Green writings and state party positions; the 1988 Rainbow Coalition and 1992 "We the People" platforms; historic constitutional documents speaking to the foundation of American liberty as a revolutionary ideal; civil rights speeches; Blue-Green alliances; environmental books; and works of engaged citizen coalitions and groups like the Bioneers. With the assistance of long-time Green webmaster, Cameron Spitzer, the drafting process of the ad-hoc committee went online and forums were set up for discussion and debate. I acquired the domain name www.gp.org and the Green platform was made available at this website, which later became the website of the founding 2000 national Platform of the Association of State Green Parties and then U.S. Green party's home site.

In 1995, key Green organizers took on the new Green party presidential campaign with inspired initiative. Rob Hager, a Green supporter in Washington, DC, virtually set up camp outside Ralph Nader's office in an attempt to convince him to run. Other supporters of a national Green presidential campaign, such as Linda Martin and Tom Linzey, lobbied Nader, while an open letter from a range of supporters across the political spectrum also urged Nader to run. After much discussion about the scope of his campaign, Nader chose to run a limited, but nonetheless robust campaign of ideas and ideals in contrast to the limited sphere of two-party 'business-as-usual' politics.

The Green's first national nominating convention was held at the University of California in Los Angeles. Our venue was particularly symbolic; during his time as Governor of California, Ronald Reagan, the figurehead of American neo-conservatism, had attempted to repress and dismantle the University of California system because of student and faculty protests against the Vietnam War. It was here on August 19, 1996 that Ralph Nader agreed to become the Green party's presidential candidate. His acceptance speech reflected Green party dissatisfaction with the two-party system, and particularly with the Democrats:

You know that you are responsible for all this. All I did was accept. Some of the prior speakers touched on a number of issues and as I was listening to them, what occurred to me was that most of the issues and subjects that the Green party is adhering to are majoritarian issues to the United States of America. And what commended the Green party so much to those of us who were not in on the founding is that if you look very carefully at the Green party platform that's being proposed for your approval, this is by far the most comprehensive, broad-based platform that deals with a wide range of systemic justice that's needed in this country: from the political, to the corporate, to the cultural, the civil liberties, the civil rights platform of any party in the country. I wouldn't begin to compare it with the flaccid, insipid, empty, cowardly platforms of the Democratic and Republican Tweedle-dum and Tweedle-dee parties...

As a matter of fact, the Democratic Party Platform doesn't even contain an affirmation of universal health coverage for all Americans. It even backed off of that. While they took money from the hospital lobby, the medical lobby, the drug industry lobby, the giant HMO's, and insurance lobby. And as far as the Republican Platform goes, this one could've been written by the Fortune 100.

The Nader campaign that began that day would form the core of a Green campaign that reached far beyond 1996 and traditional U.S politics. The results of the 40-State Organizing Effort led to new Green parties being formed, existing ones revitalized and, one month after the November election, the formation of the Association of State Green Parties, which became the Green Party of the United States.

In December 1996, organizers of the first Green presidential campaign and national organizing effort met with representatives of Green state parties to announce a newly structured national party. The meeting took place in Middleburg, Virginia, not far from the estate where Thomas Jefferson had dreamt of a democratic revolution. We had provided a foundation and the party began to grow and flourish. State parties were affiliated; national meetings were held; our 1996 platform became the basis for the founding 2000 national platform; the U.S. Greens and European Federation of Green Parties formed a working relationship with an approved "common ground" platform and shortly afterwards a global Green charter effort was inaugurated.

The legal requirements for formal recognition as the national U.S. Green party had been met and more than exceeded. In association with Tom Linzey, Dave Cobb and Dean Myerson, we successfully filed a 300-page application with the US Federal Election Committee. A U.S. Green party, a "national committee of a national party," had arrived.

REFERENCES

- ¹ For more on this point see my book, *American Twilight: On the Edge of a New Frontier* (Washington DC: Green Institute Press, 2003).
- ² During the eight years of the Clinton administration, the Democratic party lost more political races and offices at the federal, state and local levels than at any time since the 1890's presidency of Grover Cleveland and resulting election of William McKinley. President McKinley's political strategist, Mark Hanna, can be seen as the architect of the Democratic party collapse during that era, similar to President Bush's chief strategist, Karl Rove, who has referred to Hanna as his "hero" and who is often regarded as an architect of 'wedge' politics and the 1990's collapse of the Democratic party. It might also be noted that the autocratic, industrialist excesses of the McKinley presidency led to the birth of muckraking journalism, reminiscent of today's online investigative reporting and Internet "populism."
- ³ See *The Greens and the Politics of Transformation* (San Pedro, Calif. : R. & E. Miles, 1992) and *Against all Odds: The Green Transformation of American Politics* by John Rensenbrink (Raymond, ME: Leopold Press, 1999)

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Steven Schmidt founded Global Policy 360 (www.egp360.net) and Green Institute online and is editor of eGP360, the e-magazine of GP360. He is the author, with Roger Morris, of *Strategic Demands of the 21st Century: A New Vision for a New World* (www.greeninstitute.net/publications/NewVision.pdf), the Green Institute's initial policy paper. A key drafter of the founding national Green Party Platform (www.gp.org/platform2000.shtml), Schmidt chaired the original platform committee, serving from 1995 to 2001. He initiated the first Common Ground platform between the Association of State Green Parties and European Federation of Green Parties and assisted in the proposal to draft the first Green Global Charter. In 1994 he ran for Lt. Governor on the Green ticket in New Mexico with Roberto Mondragon, achieving major party status for the New Mexico Green Party, and over the course of the 1990's worked to organize a legally recognized US Green Party. From 1995-1999, he served with distinction on the New Mexico State Board of Education. In 2003 he left his position as president of a leading interactive communications company and joined with Dean Myerson to develop the Green Institute (www.greeninstitute.net) in its wide ranging research and policy work.