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2012 a great leap forward for 'third parties'?

Some could be influential; ballot access will be a key factor

by **Steven Higgs**

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Americans' faith in the two-party system of governance may have plummeted to the point where alternative candidates and parties like Dr. Jill Stein and the Green Party, former Democratic Salt Lake City Mayor Rocky Anderson and his new Justice Party, renegade Republican Congressman Ron Paul and/or his former Libertarian Party, or the Socialist Party USA just might have a impact.

"The mood of the country is toxic," *Daily Beast* contributor Douglas Schoen wrote on Feb. 14, 2012, echoing a growing conversation about the roles "third parties" might play in this year's presidential election. The day before, *Huffington Post* bloggers Sheri and Allan Rivlin posted what they called a "bold" prediction that there will be multiple alternative party surges before votes are finally cast on Nov. 6.

"There will not be one 'third party' candidate in 2012," they wrote, stressing that the phrase is a misnomer anyway. "There will be lots of minor party and independent candidates for president. Several of them may seem like a pretty big deal, at least for a period of a few weeks, in the long campaign cycle yet to unfold."

One that is getting national attention is *Americans Elect*, the subject of Schoen's piece, which rejects the idea of parties altogether.

Billing itself as the "first national online primary" in American history, *Americans Elect* says it will nominate a "competitive, nonpartisan ticket" that will be on the ballot in all 50 states. Essentially, citizens will vote online for any candidate they choose, without a party affiliation.

"*Americans Elect* is the first nonpartisan nomination," its website says. "We're using the Internet to break the gridlock in Washington, open up the political process and give every single voter – Democrat, Republican or independent – the power to nominate a presidential ticket in 2012. Your voice matters. You decide the issues. You choose the candidates."

The organization's board of directors includes its CEO Kahlil Byrd, former communications director for

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Democratic Massachusetts Gov. Deval Patrick; Dennis Blair, former director of National Intelligence, appointed and dismissed by President Barack Obama; Stephen W. Bosworth, dean of the Fletcher School at Tufts University; and former Republican New Jersey governor and EPA administrator Christine Todd Whitman.

The Americans Elect website says almost 2.5 million signatures have been collected to date. It will hold a "secure, online convention" in June, it says, to put the ticket on the ballot in every state.

As of Feb. 18, Americans Elect had more than 240 "draft candidates," with Ron Paul, Jon Huntsman and Sen. Bernie Sanders, I-Vt., the "most supported." Paul had 2,224 supporters, Huntsman 1,156 and Sanders 887.

Obama was fourth with 741 votes.

Schoen's *Beast* piece was titled, "Not Too Late for Americans Elect to Win 2012 Presidential Election." Public outrage and history, he said, suggest the system is vulnerable to outside challenge in 2012.

"Dissatisfaction with the state of our country is at record levels," wrote the coauthor of *Mad as Hell: How the Tea Party Movement is Fundamentally Remaking Our Two-Party System*, citing a Feb. 19 [Gallup poll](#). "Seventy-eight percent of Americans are dissatisfied with the way they are currently being governed."

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Allan Rivlin, *Huffington Post*

When Ross Perot ran for president in 1992, Schoen noted, the percent dissatisfied was 39. More than half -- 58 percent -- were in fact satisfied.

"Despite the relatively high satisfaction among voters compared with today, Perot still received 19 percent of the vote in 1992, given a campaign that was at best quirky," wrote the political strategist who has worked on campaigns for the likes of Bill and Hillary Clinton, Michael Bloomberg, Evan Bayh, Tony Blair and Ed Koch.

"Congressional ratings are at an all-time low," Schoen continued, citing a [Washington Post/ABC poll](#) released in January. "Just 13 percent approve of the way Congress is doing its job, while 84 percent disapprove."

That same poll showed three quarters disapprove of Republicans in Congress, and 62 percent disapprove of Democrats, he wrote. [Rasmussen Reports](#) found 70 percent say Congress's job performance is "poor."

And voters are hungry for alternatives to Obama, Mitt Romney or Rick Santorum, Schoen said.

"A recently completed Americans Elect survey found that voters favor, 58 percent to 13 percent, having an alternative presidential ticket that is independent of the Democratic and Republican parties on the ballot in 2012," he wrote. "Sixty-six percent say it is important for an independent to run for president."

A subhed on the Rivlins' *HuffPo* post was in fact titled, "Voters Will Be Searching for Alternatives." The co-editors of CenteredPolitics.com cited the "unusual pattern" of Republican primary surges as a possible precursor of the campaign ahead.

"There could be a boomlet in the spring for one independent candidate followed by a surge for another 'third party' bid in early summer, leaving time for another cycle to turn before or after the Olympics," they wrote. "... Anyone who has run a medium-sized business, commanded troops in battle, been senator or governor from any state, could look in the mirror and see a president."

The Rivlins live in Washington, D.C., and describe themselves as "centered" progressives, not ideologically centrist. Allan is a partner with the Democratic polling and strategy firm of Peter D. Hart Research Associates and for five years wrote a column for *The National Journal* and *TheNationalJournal.com*. Sherri is a graduate of the Washington College of Law.

Add to the voter unrest a story-hungry media, new online technologies that facilitate communications among communities of likeminded supporters and the *Citizens United* Supreme Court decision that opened doors to "sources of unlimited, nearly instant, infusions of campaign cash," and many of the hurdles to quick campaign success have been lowered, they said.

"If the remarkable pattern of monthly Republican frontrunner changes had structural reasons," they wrote, "then the pattern could be repeated in the general election campaign for president next fall, with potentially several minor party or independent candidates rising in the polls and at least for a few weeks onto center stage."

Americans Elect, the Rivlins noted, has gained ballot access in 16 states.

"It has the chance to become, at least temporarily, much more than a curiosity," they wrote. "This could become a vehicle for Ron Paul or former governors Buddy Roemer (Louisiana) or Gary Johnson (New Mexico). But Americans Elect does not have to be the only game in town. Anyone that can raise a big pile of money can hire a whole mess of lawyers and gain access to a few state ballots."

And in that regard, the already-organized alternative parties have an advantage, the Rivlins said.

"There is real value in the Libertarian Party nomination, as well as the Green Party nomination, and on the left, the Socialist Party USA, in the ability all have shown in gaining access to the ballots in all 50 states or at least several states," they wrote. "And getting on the ballot is what it's all about for independent and minor party candidates for president."

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Rivlin, Huffington Post

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