

Does “No Labels” Stand Any Chance?

A number of years ago, I was asked to manage a campaign for a former Williamsport City Councilman who wanted to run for Mayor. However, he decided to run a third party campaign. I said to him, “The first thing we need to do is have a party name.” We created a party and ran he did. He came in third, but made it possible for an incumbent to be defeated by the challenger. It was a great history lesson. When it came down to election day, we were unable to field the poll workers and “get out to vote” telephoners necessary to be anything other than a spoiler party.

The history of third parties in the United States has been dismal. There was George Wallace who formed the American Independent Party in 1968. Ross Perot made an effort with his Reform party, and almost made a dent. Many say that Ralph Nader was the spoiler in the election between George W. Bush and Al Gore. The history of third parties, however, goes back much further than the few mentioned. A very popular candidate was Theodore “Teddy” Roosevelt who broke with the Republican party and ran as a Bull Moose. Roosevelt’s effort awarded the presidency to Woodrow Wilson, a Democrat.

Efforts at third party victories bring to mind the Prohibition Party, Greenback Party, Know Nothings Party, the Whigs, and others. Some of the minority parties became majority parties, essentially keeping the United States on track to maintain a two-party system. Eugene Debbs ran as a Socialist after being imprisoned by the Wilson Administration prosecutors for his opposition to World War I. Debbs was a Socialist.

The latest entrant into the third party field is No Labels. This particular group has been much more tentative and careful than those in the past in terms of a presidential run. The No Labels organization has slowly been building a group of supporters in the House and Senate. It has had a few breakthroughs in terms of the passage of legislation.

The organization posits itself as the “common sense majority.” It sounds a lot like the “silent majority” of Richard Nixon.

The organization, relatively new, is just beginning to get its toes wet at townhall meetings, in terms of its internet presence, and essentially reaching out to politicians who already hold office.

A few newspaper articles have already talked about the possibility of No Labels fielding a presidential candidate, but the commitment has not yet been made. Running a candidate for office involves the kind of organization, fundraising, and structural interface that No Labels does not yet have. Matching the established corporate structure of the Democrats and Republicans would be no small feat. Aside from the hundreds of millions of dollars that would be needed to field a candidate, No Labels has little infrastructure in the big American cities and other locations where votes are mined. While the power of

unions has diminished, the advantage of having officeholders on a local and state level has thus far eluded No Labels.

The press and many disenchanted Americans in general are rooting for third parties such as No Labels, but rolling rocks uphill might be easier for No Labels than to have a strategy that could bring a presidential candidate any success.

The No Labels statement for 2024 is that it is, “preparing for the possibility of nominating a candidate.” Their website states that it will only run a candidate, “under the proper environmental conditions,” whatever that means. No Labels promises to “measure” the conditions for a candidate “rigorously, through regular polling and research.” Would No Labels submit its candidates to an electoral primary or will they choose a candidate at an old style convention of party loyalists?

The potential success of the third party raises other interesting questions. If a third party is truly successful, that could lead to coalition government in the United States. Coalitions are very common in parliamentary systems where no one party has a majority in the legislature without a deal being made with another party in order to garner a majority of office holders. Fans of the parliamentary system think this is great because it means that there will be more diverse voices in government. Others say that it is a recipe for even more gridlock than we have in the United States today.

One thing is clear, however, and that is that a significant segment of Americans have lost faith in politics and the candidates of both the Republican and Democratic Party. Whether that depressed and irritated group of Americans are sufficiently numerous and motivated to form and vote for a third party is a very different question. The power of a well-structured, highly financed, and professionally run political party has the potential to crush any nescient third party movement. State and federal laws favor the two major political parties and make it extremely difficult for anyone else to get on the ballot. Thus far, third party and non-aligned candidates continue to be minuscule in numbers and short lived in their ability to survive more than one election.

Third parties, however, have filled another very important role in the United States. Third parties have forced the major parties to reform themselves and address endemic problems in the American political structure. Perhaps even if No Labels is unsuccessful in its efforts to elect their own candidates, they will continue to attract both Republicans and Democrats who seek to work together and build a better, stronger nation. Up until this point, No Labels has simply been an organizational structure for attempting to have legislation passed by reasonable members of the existing parties. Whether they can move from the “good guy” role to actually fielding candidates is a question that we are likely to see the answer to in the upcoming 2024 Presidential election. It would not hurt to give both President Biden and Former President Trump something to worry about at the polls.

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