

More War, No Debate: Progressives Give Clinton a Free Pass

January 21, 2010

*1, 2, 3, 4,
Clinton voted for the war!
5, 6, 7, 8,
That was not a real debate!*

THAT WAS OUR CHANT OUTSIDE WABC STUDIOS on October 22 as incumbent Senator Hillary Clinton and her Republican challenger, John Spencer, debated how to continue the U.S. occupation of Iraq. As the Green Party candidate, I called for immediate withdrawal but was excluded from the debate. The League of Women Voters considered me a "bona fide" candidate because I was running a serious statewide campaign and had demonstrated support of at least 5 percent in a Zogby poll they had commissioned. The League had withdrawn sponsorship from the debate because I had been excluded. Some of the media footnoted their debate coverage with a mention of the League's withdrawal and my candidacy, but the media did not say I was the anti-war alternative to Clinton and Spencer.

When Bill and Hillary Clinton emerged out the front door of WABC studios, the chanting immediately turned into heartfelt boos from the Green protesters. Bill and Hillary put on smiles for the cameras and waved at us across the police barriers as if we were supporters. They moved right down the block to the barricades containing the Clinton supporters. About 25 reporters waddled out behind them in single file, like baby turkeys following their mother turkey across a road. I felt like the ugly duckling trying to get the baby turkeys to accept me, too. But all they wanted was a chance to ask the celebrity candidate, Hillary Clinton, a question. She didn't oblige. After briefly greeting and shaking a few hands across the barricades containing the Clinton supporters, she and Bill jumped into a huge, tinted glass SUV and sped away.

That scene sums up my anti-war campaign against pro-war Clinton. More war, no debate — not in the Senate debates, not in the media coverage.

A Green Campaign for Ballot Status and the Anti-War Vote

THE GREEN PARTY OF NEW YORK STATE was unanimous from the start that they would run a candidate against Hillary Clinton for U.S. Senate in 2006. The New York Greens promoted their whole statewide slate for Governor, Lt. Governor, Attorney General, and Comptroller as well as U.S. Senator as the "Peace Slate." An antiwar challenge to pro-war Clinton was sure to help the Greens achieve their practical objective in the election: an automatic ballot line for the next four years by winning at least 50,000 votes for our gubernatorial ticket.

If ballot access was a practical party-building goal, the goal that inspired passion in Greens was the opportunity to give voice to the anti-war majority of New Yorkers in a nationally high-profile race against pro-war Clinton, the presumptive front-runner for the Democratic presidential nomination in 2008. The Greens also knew they stood with the majority of New Yorkers against Clinton in their advocacy for a single-payer universal health insurance plan; large-scale public investment in an

emergency transition from fossil and nuclear fuels to clean, renewable energy sources; abolition of the death penalty; legalization of same-sex marriage; and other issues.

I was ready to campaign hard to win a noticeable antiwar vote and a ballot line for the Greens. However, a Zogby poll released on May 30 found that in a race between Clinton and an "unnamed anti-war candidate," Clinton would only receive 38 percent to the antiwar candidate's 32 percent, with 21 percent "not sure" and only 10 percent for "someone else." An antiwar candidate was apparently within striking distance of Clinton. It hit me like a ton of bricks. Now I felt responsible to the antiwar majority in New York for turning our grassroots campaign with its shoestring budget into a serious antiwar challenge to Clinton.

After the Zogby poll at the end of May, the rest of the campaign was a mad dash around the state from event to event trying to drum up funds, volunteer campaigners, and media coverage. I still had to work my four-hour night shift unloading freight at UPS, so sleep was neglected. At news conferences around the state in the first weeks of the campaign, I cited the Zogby poll and brazenly declared, "On three of the federal policy issues of most concern to New Yorkers — the war, health care, and energy — the majority of New Yorkers agree with me, not Hillary Clinton. If the New Yorkers vote for what they want, I will be the next Senator from New York." [1] But few reporters came to the news conferences.

Grassroots Campaigning on a Shoestring Budget

HAMMERING AWAY ON THE ISSUES in about 80 media releases, a dozen news conferences, and scores of house parties and speaking events yielded very little coverage from the big media. What little major media coverage there was of the Clinton race in the spring and summer focused on her Democratic anti-war challenger, Jonathan Tasini. Tasini's result in the September 12 Democratic primary was encouraging. With just over \$100,000 raised and little name recognition, Tasini received 125,000 votes for 16 percent. We hoped Tasini supporters would vote Green in the general election.

The media was more interested in horse races than issues and Clinton was ahead of Spencer by 40 to 50 points in the polls. On October 10, I finally did show up in the polls, but the media did not find it newsworthy. Zogby International released the only poll to include Green candidates. The poll found me with 21 percent support among independents. That translated into over five percent of all voters based on party enrollments. The poll did release the overall figure for the Green candidate for governor, Malachy McCourt, which was five percent. He had 14 percent among independents. If the ratio of support for McCourt between all voters and independents held for me, I would have had 7.5 percent support among all voters. With about 5 million voters expected in the general election, that would have been about 375,000 votes.

My campaign had not caught fire as the massive anti-war electoral insurgency that we had hoped for in the spring, but it was, according to the Zogby poll, receiving more support than any Green had ever received in New York and more than any independent progressive candidate for U.S. Senate had ever received in New York.

Election Day Results

WHEN THE RESULTS CAME IN on election night, the Greens improved only slightly on their 2002 vote. The initial canvass of votes reported the night of the election had me receiving 52,010 votes. The previous Green votes for U.S. Senate were 14,785 for Joel Kovel in 1998, 40,991 for Mark Dunau in 2000, and 36,942 for David McReynolds in 2004.

The Greens' gubernatorial ticket of Malachy McCourt for Governor and Alison Duncan for Lt. Governor only received 40,729 votes, well short of the 50,000 needed for a ballot line. The previous Green totals were 41,792 for Stanley Aronowitz and Jennifer Daniels in 2002 and 52,533 for Al Lewis and Alice Green in 1998. The other statewide Green candidates did better. Rachel Treichler for Attorney General received 57,564 votes and Julia Willebrand for Comptroller received 108,030 votes, which was 3 percent of the total.

The New York Green results were in line with most Green results around the country — one to two percent in statewide races. An exception was the Greens' candidate for Governor in Illinois, where Rich Whitney received 11 percent of the vote, the most for a third party candidate in Illinois since 1920. In local races, the Greens elected 40 candidates. One notable trend was the wins in black majority constituencies, including eight DC Statehood Green Party candidates to Neighborhood Advisory Commissions in Washington DC and Gayle McLaughlin's election as Mayor of Richmond, California, where three-fourths of the 103,000 residents are black, Latino, or Asian. There are now over 250 elected Greens in local office.

Exit polling in New York and across the country showed that the antiwar vote went to the Democrats. Six out of 10 voters were against the war nationally. Antiwar views were stronger in New York. Edison Mitkofsky, exit polling for the National Election Pool, found that 72 percent of New Yorkers disapproved of the war in Iraq and only 27 percent approved. Bush's approval ratings in New York were 74 percent disapprove and only 24 percent approve. New Yorkers voted for the Democrats to oppose Bush and the war. New Yorkers had voted for the central Green platform plank on the Democratic line.

The Democratic victories were a vote of no confidence in the Bush administration and opposition to the war in Iraq, not so much a vote for the Democrats, because they didn't present a coherent alternative on the war. We never expected much quality coverage from the corporate media, although we had hoped for more and better than we got. We also had hoped that the peace movement and other social movements would get behind our campaign. While we got most of our supporters from grassroots activists in these movements, their leaderships gave Clinton a free pass. It quickly became clear that the movement leaderships figured Clinton was unbeatable and put their energy into electing Democrats to Congress in New York. For example, Peace Action did not print up their usual Voter Guide for the Senate race in the general election.

Working Families for Corporate Lawyers

AFTER THE DEMOCRATIC PRIMARY, Jonathan Tasini refused to endorse Clinton, or me. Instead he called upon his supporters to "vote their conscience."^[2] Asked to respond, Clinton spokesperson Howard Wolfson had two words: "Who cares?"^[3] A strong Green vote might have made the Democrats care and, more importantly, inspired a resolutely independent opposition to the war and corporate politics in the anti-war and progressive movements. But the "professional progressives" who staff and lead the unions and big peace, environmental, women's, civil rights, gay, and community organizing groups had no intention of breaking with Clinton and the Democrats. Institutionalized progressivism is co-opted into service of the corporate-dominated Democratic Party coalition by the material benefits that flow through social and organizational networks from Democratic administrations to the professional progressives. The benefits include funding from Democratic administrations and corporate liberals and their foundations, as well as career opportunities in Democratic administrations and the foundations, think tanks, and political action committees that ally with the Democrats.

While most of the progressive organizations were passive and did not actively campaign for Clinton, the political party of the professional progressives, the Working Families Party, did actively

support Clinton. The party nominated Clinton over Tasini by a 94 to 6 percent vote at their state convention in May, where weighted votes carried by staff and leaders from affiliated unions, ACORN, and Citizen Action overwhelmed the pro-Tasini local chapters. Working Families spent between \$500,000 and \$1 million, much of it from Democratic politicians, on getting progressives to "vote your values" by voting for the pro-war corporate lawyers, Clinton and Spitzer, on the Working Families line. Spitzer gave Working Families \$250,000 and recorded a robo-call that most Greens, among others, received.[4] Carl McCall, an African American politician who had been the Democrats' 2002 gubernatorial candidate, robo-called black voters. Pete Seeger robo-called peace voters.

A \$25,000 mass mailing the week before the election featured Seeger, Michael Moore, and Cindy Sheehan urging voters to "Send a Message. Start To Bring the Troops Home. Vote on the Working Families Party line." The mailing was controversial because Cindy Sheehan had endorsed the Greens' Hawkins for U.S. Senate and McCourt for Governor. Sheehan promptly issued a statement reiterating her endorsements of Hawkins and McCourt. "That's the strategy followed by Ralph Nader, and it brought us George Bush," Daniel Cantor, the executive director of the Working Families Party, told the New York Sun, adding that Sheehan had given her permission to use her likeness and a quote he drafted for her.[5] Cantor had pitched the idea to Sheehan as a way to support anti-war Congressional Democrats running in New York. The actual flyer made no mention of the Democratic/Working Families congressional slate. The ballot image on the flyer had Spitzer circled.

For all the money expended, the Working Families vote for each of the statewide Democrats was between 122,000 and 127,000, a modest improvement over 91,000 votes for Democrat McCall on their line in 2002. The Working Families vote was not recorded in any of the television or newspaper reporting, but was folded into the Democratic candidates' totals. Democratic insiders will look at the number, but it was not a publicly visible message.

Working Families claims to be pressuring the Democrats to move to the left. In practice, they tail the corporate wing of the Democratic Party. Nominating Clinton over Tasini is one example. Another example is the trajectory of the Working Families Party and its affiliate organization, Citizen Action, with respect to health care. Before the Clintons rejected national health insurance in 1993, Citizen Action was leader in the movement for a single payer health insurance system. In New York, it had been central to the coalition that persuaded the state Assembly to pass a single payer bill, though it failed to pass the state Senate. Since 1993, Citizen Action, now joined by Working Families, has followed the lead of the Clintons and the other corporate Democrats in supporting reforms that reinforce the private health insurance system by expanding private coverage to uninsured groups through government mandates and subsidies. Far from pressuring the corporate Democrats, Working Families and Citizen Action are integral to their dominance by serving to co-opt progressives into supporting the agenda of the corporate wing of the Democratic Party.

No Short Cuts for the Greens

IN THE AFTERMATH OF THE 2000 PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION in which the Democrats blamed Green presidential candidate Ralph Nader for their loss of the presidential race, a faction of the Greens sought to appease progressive leaders by running a so-called "safe states" campaign in 2004 where the Green nominee would not campaign in the states where the race was close in order to not hurt the Democratic candidate's chances. Although probably not supported by the majority of rank and file Greens, the national Green Party did nominate a safe-states candidate, David Cobb, in 2004.[6] In the end, the attempt by the national Green Party to appease progressive movement leaders has done nothing to diminish the attacks on the Greens as "spoilers." The Greens are going to have to make their case for independent politics as the most effective way to advance a progressive agenda

directly to movement activists and the broader voting public over the heads of the professional progressives who staff and lead the progressive organizations that ally with the Democrats.

The Democrats may control the House and the Senate now, but they show no inclination to initiate substantial changes in U.S. foreign or domestic policy. The issues will remain and the Greens' platform will remain relevant. A celebrity presidential candidate would give the Greens a better chance of getting their platform into the media and public debate. But celebrities who share the politics of the Greens and are willing to stick their necks out, like an Al Lewis, a Malachy McCourt, or a Ralph Nader, are very rare. In most races for higher office, the Greens are going to have to settle for the time being for base-building campaigns that raise the issues and recruit new activists, but have little prospect of winning the office. Local races are another matter. The Greens can compete with the corporate-sponsored candidates by grassroots campaigns in smaller districts. That is where the Greens should concentrate their energies now.

The Green vote in 2006 in New York demonstrated a modest increase in their core base. Most of the Tasini primary vote and the peace vote — the majority of New Yorkers — went to Clinton and the Democrats. My Senate race showed how difficult it is to win those voters over to an independent challenge to the two-party system of corporate rule in a large-scale campaign for federal office. The media ignored us. The corporate parties overwhelmed us with their money. However, the campaign was still worth doing. We reached thousands of voters through campaign meetings, mostly local radio and TV appearances, and newspaper articles. We will be able to bring some of those people into the Green Party as active members.

However, to expand that base of independent Green voters significantly, the Greens are going to have to rededicate their organizing to building strong local chapters that can engage progressive activists and voters in their own communities. Over the last decade, as the Green Party has focused more on electoral politics, the original base of membership locals that was built up in the 1980s and early 1990s has withered. As state Green parties achieved ballot status and conformed to state election laws, dues-paying membership locals gave way to county and state committees composed largely of self-selecting activists who pass petitions among Green enrollees to secure their positions. Voting in state committees and conventions is not based in too many cases on election by and accountability to an ongoing local organization. In New York, the Greens tried to maintain the old locals as Green political clubs separate from but supporting the formal committee structure required by the state Election Law. But the locals have declined and the energy has mostly gone into the state committee. The Greens need to revisit their structure. In New York, it would be perfectly legal to base the state committee on some combination of Green enrollment and paid membership in each county. This would create an incentive for the local county organizations to reorganize and recruit paid members, which would strengthen the state party at the grassroots and financially. More importantly, it would strengthen the Green Party at the local level where it is best positioned at this point to win new support, lead issue campaigns, and elect Greens to municipal councils and mayorships.

Footnotes

1. See "New York's Anti-War Majority Can Elect an Anti-War Senator," Statement of Howie Hawkins, Green Party nominee for U.S. Senate, outside the military recruiting center at Times Square, New York City, June 1, 2006. The text and a video of the presentation can be found at www.hawkinsforsenate.org. All of the campaign's media releases, news coverage, and literature are archived there.
2. The day before the election, Tasini sent an email message to his supporters and posted it on his website telling them how to write in his name for U.S. Senator. The statement is at Tasini's web site:

www.tasinifornewyork.com.

3. Marc Humbert, AP Political Writer, "Nader: Clinton's running and it could be her versus McCain," September 19, 2006.
4. AP, Michael Gormley, AP Writer, "Voters choose first new governor in 12 years," November 7, 2006.
5. Russell Berman, "Working Families Party Comes Out for Spitzer, Clinton," *NY Sun*, November 7, 2006.
6. For statements and articles on the 2004 strategy debate in the Green Party and broader progressive movements, and the controversy over how Cobb secured the nomination, see Howie Hawkins (ed.), *Independent Politics: The Green Party Strategy Debate* (Haymarket, 2006).