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Ralph Nader running again -- impact on the race?

by *Mark Silva* and updated with analysis

Ralph Nader, the consumer advocate, said today that he will run for president again.



Nader, who played a spoiler's role in the presidential election of 2000, said today on NBC News' *Meet the Press* that he is ready to run again in 2008.

"I have decided to run for president," said Nader, who, at 73, is a couple of years older than the likely Republican nominee, John McCain.

Nader is voicing a familiar refrain: Maintaining that most Americans are disenchanted with the Democratic and Republican Parties, and that none of the presidential candidates address ways to combat corporate crime and waste within the Pentagon waste and to promote labor rights.

Nader ran as a third-party candidate in 2000 and 2004.

And many Democrats will never forgive him for the role he played in 2000, when his marginal share of the vote in Florida likely cost Democrat Al Gore victory in a razor-thin, disputed vote.

The days of a third-party candidate claiming a large share of the American vote -- such as the nearly 20 percent that H. Ross Perot won in 1992, playing a role that many Republicans will never forget -- may be gone.

Yet, with elections contested on the margins in many states -- from Iowa to Wisconsin, and from New Hampshire to Florida in recent years -- any active third-party candidacy could have an impact on the Electoral College balance.

And already this year, sizeable numbers of people have voiced discontent with the leading candidates -- discontent manifested in the campaign of Republican Ron Paul, for instance. So the question looms this year: Might Nader play the spoiler once more?

For an analysis of Nader's prospects this year, read on:

(Ralph Nader, photo from the Kennedy School of Government, Harvard)

Nader, the longtime consumer advocate who played a likely spoiler's role in the presidential election of 2000 but carried much less weight in 2004, said today that he will wage another campaign for president this year.

Nader, 73, is voicing a familiar refrain of disenchantment with the Democratic and Republican parties, a detachment which he believes is shared by many voters.

A protracted war in Iraq, struggling economy and tax breaks for the rich during the Bush administration have added to a sense of discontent among lower- and middle-class voters, Nader said, in announcing his candidacy during an interview on NBC News' *Meet the Press*.

"You take that framework of people feeling locked out, shut out, marginalized and disrespected," Nader said. "In that context, I have decided to run for president."

Yet experts say Nader's impact this year is likely to be limited.

"The truth is that Nader's time has passed," John Geer, a political scientist at Vanderbilt University, told the Tribune today.

As the candidate for the Green Party in 2000, Nader attracted just 2.7 percent of the vote nationwide.

Yet, with the 97,488 votes that he collected in Florida -- 1.6 percent of the total there -- many observers believe that Nader cost Democrat Al Gore victory in a state which George W. Bush carried by a disputed margin of 538 votes that year.

That Supreme Court-settled Florida vote also cost the Democrats the White House in a year when Gore won more than 500,000 more votes than Bush nationally -- with Bush claiming a narrow majority of the Electoral College vote.

Yet, in 2004, when Nader ran as an independent, he garnered only 0.3 percent of the vote, appearing on the ballots of 34 states.

This year, Democrats say, the heavy turnout of voters attracted by the party's early primary elections suggests more enthusiasm for the party's candidates. Nader's impact on the 2008 election campaign should be minimal, they say.

"I think it's a non-event," said Arizona Gov. Jane Napolitano, a Democrat supporting Sen. Barack Obama's campaign for president, in an appearance today on CBS News' *Face the Nation*. "They aren't looking for a third-party candidate."

Michigan Gov. Jennifer Granholm, a Democrat supporting Sen. Hillary Clinton's campaign for president, agreed that Nader's decision is "a non-event."

"There is unhappiness in the electorate, and (Texas Republican Rep.) Ron Paul's bid captures that anger," Geer said. "But Ralph Nader is not the vehicle for the expression of this discontent. Nader was a spoiler in 2000 and will long be remembered for that. But when he ran in 2004, few cared.

"If Obama is the nominee in 2008, (Nader's) share may well decline below 0.3 percent," he said. "There is simply no room for Nader to run."

Still, Republican candidate Mike Huckabee of Arkansas, noting that Nader's past campaigns have generally sapped votes from the Democratic nominee, said today on CNN: "Naturally, Republicans would welcome his entry into the race."

In his own appearance today, Nader criticized both major parties -- Republican candidate Sen. John McCain and Democrats Obama and Clinton alike -- for failing to crack down on Pentagon waste and a "bloated military budget. Nader, who made his name in Washington as a consumer activist challenging the products of major corporations, blamed the parties' inaction on the influence of corporate lobbyists and special interests in the capital.

"The issue is, do they have the moral courage, do they have the fortitude to stand up to corporate powers and get things done for the American people," Nader said of the leading candidates. "We have to shift the power from the few to the many."

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