

# **The Declining Significance of Ralph: The 2004 Elections and the Future of Independent and Minor Party Politics in America\***

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**Abstract:** Following a surprising campaign in which many considered him to hold the balance of power between the two major parties, Ralph Nader's third run for the presidency in 2004 was far less auspicious. In this paper, we analyze the reasons for his demise. Utilizing data derived from The Gallup Organization and other sources, we find that Nader not only declined dramatically in his core states in the Pacific, Mountain and New England regions (due in large part to ballot access difficulties) but saw the makeup of his constituency shift away from progressive, non-church goers toward conservatives, Republican identifiers, and casually church-going Protestants. As Nader's public image began to erode after the 2000 election, we argue, the remnants of his lingering support came to resemble a less personally attached, "other" vote than the more defined and active leftish constituency that backed his campaign four years prior. His current base remains young, but shows less inclination to participate, and more inclination to diverge from him ideologically. In a larger sense, his candidacy in 2004 raises important questions about our understanding of minor party politics in presidential elections – and whether future alternative candidates will exploit the historic opportunity to play a strategic pivotal, or 'spoiler', role in national politics.

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Following a surprising campaign in which many considered him to hold the balance of power between the two major parties, Ralph Nader's third run for the presidency in 2004 was something far less auspicious. Attacked by the left, strategically promoted by the right, and shunned by his Green Party base, Nader-the-Independent seemingly spent as much time in court vying for ballot access as on the campaign trail competing for votes. His appearances diminished from "Super Rallies" in raucous concert arenas to the sedate confines of university lecture halls. He lacked the money for ads, but became the target of ads attacking him. In the end, Nader qualified for nearly three-quarters of state ballots representing a variety of party labels. But he received less than half the votes he got in 2000 and saw his share exceed the two-party margin in only one state, Wisconsin, which was carried narrowly by Senator John Kerry. Four years prior, the Nader vote was a factor in at least eight states, two of which – Florida and New Hampshire – went infamously to President George W. Bush.

Failure is rarely a source of inspiration in political science, perpetual failure even less so. Even the body of literature that concerns itself with those who rarely win American elections – call them "third", "minor", "independent" or "alternative" parties and candidates – often concentrates on such movements at their peak, rather than their decline (e.g., Rosenstone, Behr and Lazarus 1996)<sup>1</sup>. It is the natural byproduct of studying parties in a winner-take-all electoral system. Nader's run in 2004, however, remains extraordinary if, for no other reason, than because two-party electoral politics in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century are extraordinary – extraordinarily competitive. If much of what we know about alternative politics is true – that significant independents emerge in a climate of major party vulnerability not strength, "after landslides not cliffhangers" as Rosenstone and his colleagues put it<sup>2</sup>, – one would not have expected a candidate of Nader's stature to come forth in 2004. Yet, with no party structure, a reputation in decline, and with the Republicans and Democrats nearly deadlocked in the Electoral College, he did.

In this paper, we take an in-depth look at this unique, and highly controversial, presidential run. We begin by unfolding the events of 2004, marking the points of contrast

between this and past Nader efforts in 1996 and 2000. Here we give particular attention to the effect of state ballot access laws – an issue that, in and of itself, came to dominate the Nader campaign. We then analyze the changes in Nader’s constituency by using survey data provided by The Gallup Organization and aggregate data gathered at the state and county level. We conclude by addressing the consequences of Nader’s decline – and consider its broader implications for multiparty and independent politics in America.

### **The Anatomy of Descendence: The 2004 Campaign**

It seems odd to describe as compelling a presidential campaign that receives 0.4 percent of the national vote, appears on just over 2/3 of ballots and finishes fourth, fifth and sometimes even sixth, behind other minor party candidates in several states. Yet, in a climate of celebrity fascination as well as tight two-party competition, Ralph Nader somehow remained a story in 2004: the anti-candidate, the consumer’s crusader defying embittered Democrats, suddenly pragmatic progressives as well as journalists who seemed to simultaneously dismiss and cover his every move. Perhaps at no time in recent American history has a political figure with so marginal of a constituency been so closely watched or so readily feared. Wallace, in 1968, could lay claim the South. And Perot, leading the polls in early 1992, could claim almost whatever he wanted due to his wealth. But the Nader 2004 campaign rested solely on *potential* – the mere hypothesis that he might affect another dramatically close election by tapping anger simmering over the Bush Administration’s incursion into Iraq. As Michael Moore’s controversial *Fahrenheit 9/11* became a surprise hit in the spring, and Vermont Governor Howard Dean surged to an early lead for the Democratic Party nomination, it seemed certain that antiwar sentiments would spill over into, if not engulf, the fall campaign. Nader, this time with no party to satisfy, and no chance to win, would unquestionably be the most free-wheeling and articulate critic of the Bush Doctrine.

The irony was that, when Nader finally announced his intention to mount another presidential run on *Meet the Press* on February 22, Moore, like Noam Chomsky and other icons

of the Left, had long since taken public stands against such a campaign. *The Nation*, as early as December 2002, begged on its pages, “Ralph, Don’t Run” and in an open letter to Nader published six days before his announcement, repeated their plea. “For the good of the country, the many causes you’ve championed, and for your own good name,” the editors wrote, “don’t run for president this year.” After Dean dropped out on February 18, falling victim to the bizarre “scream heard ‘round the world” after his poor showing in Iowa, Nader seemed emboldened by the opportunity to carry the progressive torch. Dean would ask Nader to abandon his quest five days after the Governor himself bowed out: “If George Bush is reelected,” he warned fellow Democrats, “it will be government by, of and for the corporations – exactly what Nader has struggled against.” He would explicitly caution his supporters “not to be tempted by independent or third party candidates.” Speaking at the National Press Club, Nader played down his potential threat to the left, saying “the liberal establishment” should “relax and rejoice” since his “candidacy is not going to get many Democratic votes.” Conservatives and independents disaffected from Bush would be his primary constituency this year, drawn to his clear stances against free trade and corporate crime. “The party-out-of-power members come back into the fold,” he told National Public Radio. “It’s the party-in-power that has the difficulty on the edges”.

### *A Break from the Greens*

Within the Green Party, a long debate has centered on the value of running candidates for the presidency. In some ways, it is reflective of a fundamental paradox facing minor parties in America: should they marshal their scant resources in an attempt to grow, even at the risk of losing their philosophical *raison d’etre*? Or should they stay ideologically pure, even at the risk of being electorally stagnant? (Collet 2002) The purism-pragmatism dilemma is a unique one for Greens, because considerable emphasis is placed on local activism – and because the party has shown success in some towns and cities by running focused, parochial campaigns.<sup>3</sup> “Grassroots democracy” is at the top of their Ten Key Values, even before “ecological wisdom.”

So when Nader told the Party in a letter dated December 22, 2003 that he would not seek its nomination for the presidency, the news came as a mixed bag. On the one hand, Nader – who had never registered as Green – was slapping the party in the face and recalling the fears of some who never wanted to become involved in presidential politics or nominate a celebrity candidate in the first place. On the other, it was clear he still wanted their support. He gave pragmatic reasons. “The occasion for this letter,” he wrote, “is not simply that there are robust contending views about whether to have a Presidential candidate...but that...it is not feasible within the difficult parameters of state and federal election laws to wait and see what the Green Party will do.” Because party rules required the decision to be made by delegates at its national convention the following June, Nader explained that it was too risky to wait; in many states, the requirements for getting on the ballot would require longer preparation. Still, he didn’t close the door. “In the event that I should still decide to become a presidential candidate,” he concluded, “any collaborative efforts that are possible, especially at the state and local level, would be welcome.”

Nader’s semi-withdrawal from the Green nomination quest left an opening for David Cobb, a public interest lawyer who helped to found the Texas Green Party in 1999 and organize the successful ballot access drive there for Nader in 2000. Cobb’s mantra was for the Greens to pursue a so-called “safe states” strategy: in areas where the major parties were competitive, Cobb would abstain. It was antithetical to Nader’s pursuit of being the relevant pivot, but Cobb argued that it would help to keep progressives from tuning the Greens out in the future. Nader, for his part, tried to maintain ties to the Party by nominating longtime activist Peter Miguel Camejo as his running mate. Camejo had run for governor of California in both 2002 and in the 2003 recall, taking more than 5 percent in the former and distinguishing himself in televised debates against Arnold Schwarzenegger and Cruz Bustamante in the latter. In early 2004, Camejo had begun his own campaign for the Green presidential nomination in California, but just before the party convention in Milwaukee began, he joined the Nader ticket.

When the convention met on June 26<sup>th</sup>, the Greens' decision boiled down to three choices: 1) abstain from the presidential race altogether; 2) nominate Cobb; 3) endorse Nader (Martin 2005). Camejo carried a so-called "Unity Resolution" that would have allowed Greens to endorse both Cobb and Nader and then allow each state party to use their ballot line at their own discretion. It was rejected (Camejo 2005). After the first round of voting, which by party rule is held under an instant runoff system, Cobb received 309 delegate votes compared to 119 for Camejo and 117.5 for Nader. In the second round, Cobb prevailed over "no nominee", 408 to 308, and won the nomination. "Greens Rebuke Nader" read the headline in the *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel* the next day.

### *The Campaign in the Courtroom*

Without the Greens, Nader was still able to qualify for 35 state ballots (**Table 1**). Although his campaign was nominally independent, he appeared in 18 states as the nominee of eight different political parties – ranging from the Reform Party (in Colorado, Florida, Kansas, Mississippi, and Rhode Island) to the Peace and Justice Party in New York. In four states, he ran under the designation, "The Better Life". He qualified as an Independent (or "By Petition") in 17, mostly smaller, states (115 electoral votes). The four states in which Nader was barred entirely included three crucial elements of his influence-oriented campaign: Oregon and Hawaii, which each had given him 5% in 2000 and Ohio, which was promising to be the Florida of 2004. Symptomatic of the backlash against his candidacy, these failures distinguish this run from his run in 2000, where the three states in which he failed to qualify – South Dakota, Oklahoma and North Carolina – were strategically inconsequential. On the bright side, Nader had somehow managed, under extremely difficult circumstances (Winger 2005), to make it onto two-thirds of the state ballots. On the dark side, these states nominated just over half of the electors in the Electoral College. In more than two-fifths of the College, as in 1996, voters would have to write his name.

**Table 1: Nader Ballot Status and Electoral College Impact, 1996-2004**

	1996	(EV)	2000	(EV)	2004	(EV)
<b><i>Appeared on state ballots*</i></b>	22	(225)	44	(481)	35	(278)
...as party candidate	19	(192)	39	(435)	18	(163)
...as Independent	3	(33)	5	(46)	17	(115)
<b><i>Certified as write-in</i></b>	15	(225)	4	(32)	12	(222)
<b><i>Failed to qualify</i></b>	14	(88)	3	(25)	4	(38)

\* Includes the District of Columbia. Total electoral votes (EV) in parentheses. Source: Federal Election Commission.

Much was made of the major party machinations, but the systemic fact remains: Nader's ballot status in 2004 was as much a reflection of an institutionalized structure of state access laws – and the failure to get injunctive relief from federal courts (see Winger 2005) – as short-term political chicanery. In Oklahoma, one of the most impenetrable ballots in the nation, Nader failed to get on in 1996, 2000 and 2004; in Georgia, Idaho and Indiana, also notoriously difficult states, he could never qualify as more than a write-in candidate. Without access to the Green Party line, he receded in 2004 to write-in status in vote-rich Arizona, California, Illinois, Massachusetts, Texas, Pennsylvania and Virginia, and, as we mentioned, fell completely off Hawaii's and Oregon's ballots. Only in South Dakota could Nader claim progress: he finally made the ballot as an Independent after failing in his two previous campaigns.

**Figure 1** underscores the point. Using a measure designed by Richard Winger (2004), we compute the average number of signatures required to get an independent or new party on a presidential ballot in each state by Nader's status in that state in 2004. The states where Nader failed to qualify had, on average, the highest barriers (requiring petition signatures from 0.66% of the state's registered voters); those where he could only manage write-in certification had the next highest requirements (0.53%). By contrast, the states that saw Nader qualify as an independent

required signatures from an average of 0.41% of registered voters. Where he secured a party line, the laws were, by far, the least restrictive (0.19%).<sup>4</sup>

==Insert Figure 3: State Signature Requirements by Nader Ballot Status in 2004==

### *A Spoiled Image*

As Nader got bogged down in legal trenches, his reputation took a further beating. The austerity of his campaign – he raised just \$1.5 million in individual contributions – not only fostered the image of a plodding and stubborn campaign, but left his growing armada of antagonists free to attack. Several websites launched in response to his candidacy, but TheNaderFactor.com (funded by a group of Democratic activists calling itself the National Progress Fund) was perhaps the most vigorous, using its resources to air television and radio spots in battleground states that portrayed a phony “Bush-Nader ‘04” ticket and linked the candidate to the GOP right wing. A 30 second radio ad in Oregon, Pennsylvania and Florida asked listeners, “Remember Florida and the 2000 election? Well, the same right-wing Republicans that are anti-choice and anti-environment are suddenly pro-Nader.” In New Mexico and Wisconsin, a TheNaderFactor.com TV ad showed a remorseful Nader voter from 2000 who had concluded afterward that the decision was wrong. The edge was softer, but the message equally potent: “Four years ago, I supported Ralph Nader because he stood for the issues I believe in,” said school teacher Bob Schick, looking directly into the camera. “But now, after seeing how quickly and thoroughly the Bush Administration has wounded our country...I feel I made a mistake.” He concluded: “By supporting Ralph Nader, I actually helped George Bush.”<sup>5</sup>

The respect that Nader had garnered over decades of leading the cause of consumer advocacy was seeming like ancient history. In a 1976 Roper Poll, more than 2,000 Americans were asked to identify the characteristics that described Ralph Nader. Topping the list were “dedicated” (checked by 40% of the respondents), “honest” (34%) and “public spirited” (30%).<sup>6</sup>

Nader was often mentioned in other surveys as one of the most admired Americans; in both 1972 and 1976, his name was floated as a presidential nominee. As recently as 1989, 70 percent of Americans had a “favorable” view of Nader, according to an NBC News/*Wall Street Journal* Poll<sup>7</sup> (**Figure 2**). His visibility receded through the 1990s, as indicated by a high level of “no opinion” responses in a 1996 CBS News/*New York Times* Poll, but rebounded in 2000 to enjoy a nearly 2-to-1 ratio of favorable to unfavorable ratings throughout most of the campaign.

==Insert Figure 2: Trendline on Nader Fav/Unfav, 1989-2004==

In the interregnum between the verdict in December 2000 and becoming a repeat candidate in early 2004, however, he started to fall into disfavor. This is shown in both Gallup and Pew polls in **Figure 2** and in greater detail in a series of surveys conducted by Stanley Greenberg for the Democratic-leaning Democracy Corps/Institute for America’s Future.<sup>8</sup> Measuring Nader’s popularity through 100 point feeling thermometers, **Figure 3** shows only small increases in his “cold” ratings through October 2000; a plurality were still neutral. But then two large increases in “cold” feelings occurred: first, from May 2001 to July 2002 and; second, between May 2003 to May 2004.<sup>9</sup> Becoming increasingly known to the world as a spoiler, Nader’s dismissal of the policy differences between Gore and Bush emerged as political fodder as the Bush Administration launched its invasion of Iraq. Nader thus began the 2004 campaign with roughly half of America holding an antipathetic view of him. Even his core – liberals, young people, union households and those with a college education – was now viewing him with hostility.<sup>10</sup>

==Insert Figure 3: Democracy Corps Poll Feeling Thermometer: “Ralph Nader” and “Green Party/Ralph Nader’s Party”, 2000-2004

As the campaign wore on, public perceptions of Nader – seemingly like the candidate himself – hardened. Little movement is seen in the Gallup, Pew and Greenberg measures.

Between the March and September 2004 Gallup surveys, Nader ranges from 26 to 33 percent “favorable”; 44 to 48 percent “unfavorable”. In the Greenberg polls, he goes from 52 percent “cold” in March 2004 to 54 percent on Election Day. The fallout from the 2000 campaign seemed unwieldy; Nader had no resources to counter the onslaught.

In a deliberate, almost self-fulfilling, fashion, Nader thus encountered the twin political pillars of expediency and entrenchment. Liberals and Democrats grew petulant, itching for a chance to topple Bush. But it was more than a surly Left, and the “corporation disguised as a human being” in the White House, as Nader liked to say, that he ran against. It was the very system – a Byzantine structure of laws and rules, made and preserved by the corporate-beholden major parties, that suffocated anyone with the temerity to challenge them on the ballot or in the debate hall. Above all, it was a society driven by money. Journalists and friends began to note that Nader’s once inexhaustible energy seemed to diminish as his opponents grew more numerous and ever larger; at times, Nader would wield his broadening brush and attack the very culture that put shopping and sports over education and activism. With his popularity in decline, was the public becoming as much his target as the corporations who corrupted them? Independent candidacies had prospered before by telling Americans things they didn’t want to hear. But, in Nader’s case, it seemed the messenger was becoming as bitter as the message. Confined to playing in half the Electoral College field, his returns on Election Day would certainly be limited. His relevance was still a question mark, though, depending on the closeness between Kerry and Bush – and whether history would repeat itself in Florida, where Nader was on the ballot and had actively campaigned.

On November 2, the answer came. Bush comfortably won the national vote over Kerry by more than 3 million; Nader garnered 465,650 votes out of 122,295,345 cast, a microscopic 0.4 percent that put him much closer to Libertarian candidate Michael Bednarik (397,265) than to having any effect on the outcome between the major parties. Wisconsin was a lone exception: Nader’s 0.5% exceeded the Republican/Democrat difference. But, since the state went to Kerry,

any discussion of influence was avoided. In only one county – Grand in Utah – did Nader match the 2.7 percent share he earned nationwide in 2000; in a handful of others in the Deep South and Mountain West, Nader actually finished behind Bednarik, and sometimes behind Constitution Party candidate Michael Peroutka and Cobb. Easily, it was the worst of his three presidential runs, amounting to less than 1/5 of the votes he earned in 2000 and just 2/3 of which he earned in 1996, when he only passively campaigned.

What happened?

### **Data Sources**

To address the question, we investigate three major sources of data. The first two are at the individual level. The Gallup Organization polled Americans on their presidential vote choice at 26 intervals between January 9 and October 31, 2004 (80 days of interviewing spread over eight months). Pooled, these surveys include interviews with 28,242 adults, 18 and over – among them are 1,049 firm or leaning Nader supporters. As the Gallup dataset is based on pre-election supporters, rather than voters *per se*, we sought a third source of data that would describe the Naderites who actually went to the polls. This is a significant distinction since support for minor parties and candidates typically diminishes as Election Day closes (Collet 1996)<sup>11</sup>. We thus examine the results of the 2004 National Election Poll Exit Poll conducted by Edison Media Research and Mitofsky International on November 2, 2004. The combined national file, in which 77,006 interviews are included, contains 551 identified Nader voters.

The second set of data are aggregate, consisting of official election state and county returns, party registration and turnout figures, for the 1996, 2000 and 2004 elections. Individual year files obtained from [uselectionatlas.org](http://uselectionatlas.org) were combined and modified to form a single, usable dataset.

### Individual-Level Analysis: More Conservative, Less Committed

Between 2000 and 2004, some noteworthy changes took place in the Nader constituency (Table 2). We focus on three. The first is a *social/demographic shift* away from well educated, non-church going supporters to less educated, Protestant, occasional church goers. Second is a *partisan and ideological shift* from Independents, Democrats and liberals toward moderate and conservative Republicans. Third is an apparent *shift toward lower propensity voters*; a group that had strong intentions to vote in 2000 receded in intensity in 2004.

**Table 2: Nader 2004/Nader 2000 and Kerry/Gore Pre-Election Supporters Compared in Gallup Poll**

	Nader 2004	Nader 2000	Net		Kerry	Gore	Net
	%	%	%		%	%	%
Male	52	54	-2		45	42	+3
Female	48	46	+2		55	58	-3
18-29	22	17	+5		14	11	+3
30-49	40	43	-3		35	40	-5
50-64	25	25	0		29	26	+3
65+	13	14	-1		22	24	-2
Married	44	49	-5		49	51	-2
Live w/ partner	9	5	+4		7	5	+2
Widowed	7	6	+1		10	12	-2
Divorced	16	14	+2		16	16	0
Single, never married	21	24	-3		18	17	+1
Union household	16	20	-4		19	22	-3
HS diploma	30	24	+6		24	36	-12
Some college	27	33	-6		25	32	-7
College grad	34	38	-4		44	32	+12
Protestant	42	28	+14		45	40	+5
Catholic	23	26	-3		26	29	-3
Other	20	22	-2		17	18	-1
None	13	19	-6		11	7	+4
Attend church...							
Once per week	22	21	+1		25	32	-7
Almost every week	8	7	+1		11	11	0
Once a month	13	10	+3		14	14	0
Seldom/Never	56	63	-7		49	41	+8
Party ID							
Republican (+ lean)	31	21	+10		7	7	0
Independent (no lean)	19	26	-7		3	4	-1
Democrat (+ lean)	50	54	-4		90	89	+1

	<i>Nader 2004</i>	<i>Nader 2000</i>	<b>Net</b>		<i>Kerry</i>	<i>Gore</i>	<b>Net</b>
	%	%	%		%	%	%
<i>Ideology</i>							
Very liberal	11	14	-3		8	4	+4
Liberal	20	26	-6		26	23	+3
Moderate	40	38	+2		46	46	0
Conservative	22	16	+6		16	20	-4
Very conservative	4	2	+2		3	3	0
Don't Know	2	4	-2		1	3	-2
High likelihood of voting*	62	80	-18		86	84	+2
(N)	(919)	(591)			(10446)	(8096)	

Notes: Data are pooled from pre-election polls throughout 2000 and 2004. They are unweighted.

(\*) Poll asked respondents to assess their likelihood of voting on a 1-10 point scale, with 10 being extremely likely. "High likelihood" is defined as those who gave a 9 or 10.

Looking at Table 2, we see that Nader made slight gains among women in 2004; his support, however, remained male majority – a contrast with Gore and Kerry, who have relied more on support from women. He made further gains among those Americans already known to be a significant part of the Nader coalition: those who are 18-29 years old. Both Nader and Kerry lost married and single voters, as well as union households. More significant, however, is that Nader appears to have ceded to the Democrat some of the better educated – another key element of his prior campaign. Seventy-one percent of Nader's 2000 constituency had gone to college; four years later, this declined to 61 percent. By comparison, 69 percent of Kerry backers had gone to college and 44 percent took a diploma – an increase of 12 percentage points from Al Gore's.

Religion is another area of difference. Naderites in 2000 were distinguished by low levels of religiosity: 19 percent reported they were not affiliated with an organized church and 63 percent said they "seldom" or "never" attended services. Four years later, this declined to 13 and 56 percent, respectively, as the proportion who identified as Protestants increased substantially (from 28 to 42 percent). Kerry may have picked up some of this non-church-going crowd as he posted gains in the proportion of those who "seldom" or "never" attend services (from 7 percent

in 2000 to 11 percent in 2004) and saw a decline in the proportion of supporters who attend every week (from 32 percent in 2000 down to 25 percent).

The second important shift – and the one central to critics, as well as defenders, of the 2004 Nader candidacy – revolves around partisanship and ideology. In 2000, 54 percent of Nader supporters identified as Democrats, 26 percent as Independents. But as the Kerry/Gore base attracted just a handful of Republicans over two elections (7 percent), Nader’s campaign grew from one-fifth (21 percent) to nearly one-third GOP identifying (31 percent). The proportion of Democrats in his campaign declined to 50 percent, and Independents shrunk to less than one-fifth (19 percent). Further, consider Nader’s loss (and Kerry’s gain) of liberals. Those reporting themselves to be “very” or “somewhat” liberal were a combined 40 percent of Nader’s 2000 backing, just 27 percent of Gore’s. But four years later, liberals constituted a larger proportion of Kerry’s (34 percent), not Nader’s support (31 percent). As conservatives declined from Gore to Kerry, they became a larger part of the Nader campaign, growing from 18 to 26 percent.

The last area of contrast, and in some ways the most important, is in the likelihood of voting. As the last of seven screening items in their likely voter model, Gallup asks the question

If ‘1’ represents someone who will definitely not vote and ‘10’ represents someone who definitely will vote, where on this scale would you place yourself?

To be considered a ‘likely’ voter, a poll respondent would answer “7” or higher. Here, we present only those who gave a response of “9” or “10” – the Americans most motivated to cast a ballot. In 2000, 80 percent of Nader backers fell into this high-propensity category – a proportion in the same ballpark as that found in the Gore (84 percent) camp. But in 2004, as Kerry’s share of these voters grew to 86 percent, Nader’s fell dramatically to just 62 percent. Simply put, Nader lost a significant number of his most-driven supporters.

Thus, where the 2000 Nader campaign revealed itself as a small, but active, center-left following, the 2004 version came to resemble the loose, perpetual fragments of major party dissent, the fringe floaters inclined either to abstain from politics – or to cast ballots, perhaps on a

whim, for anything but the establishment. We can see this in greater detail in the Edison/Mitofsky National Exit poll results displayed in **Table 3**. In many ways, those who went to the polls for Nader in 2004 look like those who voted for “Other” (that is, an alternative candidate unmeasured or categorized in the survey) than those who backed the Democratic nominee: they are more conservative, give higher approval ratings to Bush and more support for the war in Iraq (although 2 in 3 nonetheless opposed the decision). This is a change from the 2000 election, when Nader voters were decidedly less supportive of establishment policies than Gore voters (Collet and Hansen 2002). Voters for Nader and “Other” in 2004, furthermore, share the twin traits of being late deciders and less likely to say their vote was “for [their] candidate.” Nader voters are comparable to Kerry voters in that a plurality of each say they have been worse off under Bush; by comparison, a higher proportion of “Other” voters say their family’s economic situation has improved. There are some regional differences as well. Where nearly a third of Nader voters surveyed were from the East, 39 percent of “Other” voters were from the West. This may partially reflect the ballot access restrictions on Nader in California, Oregon and Hawai’i. It may also suggest variations in the stability of his vote at the regional level, a phenomenon we can examine in greater detail with the use of aggregate data.

**Table 3: Nader, “Other” and Kerry Election Day Supporters Compared in Edison/Mitofsky Exit Poll, November 2, 2004**

	<i>Nader</i>		<i>Other</i>		<i>Kerry</i>
	%		%		%
<i>Region</i>					
East	32		19		26
Midwest	26		20		26
South	21		21		25
West	21		39		23
<i>No matter how you voted today, do you usually think of yourself as a...</i>					
Democrat	20		12		66
Republican	15		14		5
Independent	66		74		29
Liberal	27		21		37
Moderate	52		48		52
Conservative	22		31		11
<i>Bush approval</i>					

	<i>Nader</i>		<i>Other</i>		<i>Kerry</i>
	%		%		%
Strongly approve	7		9		2
Somewhat approve	24		24		6
Somewhat disapprove	25		24		22
Strongly disapprove	42		42		69
<i>Decision to go to war with Iraq</i>					
Strongly approve	10		9		3
Somewhat approve	22		24		12
Somewhat disapprove	23		24		24
Strongly disapprove	43		42		60
<i>Vote for president was mainly...</i>					
For your candidate	47		48		55
Against his opponent	41		26		41
Omitted	13		26		4
<i>Family's financial situation compared to four years ago...</i>					
Better today	17		28		13
About the same	40		37		39
Worse today	42		33		47
<i>Decided on vote...</i>					
Just today	19		19		6
In the last three days	9		8		4
Sometime last week	10		6		3
During the last month	19		19		12
Before that	43		46		74
(N)	(551)		(543)		(38066)

Notes: Data are unweighted.

### At the Aggregate Level

When looking at the aggregate-level returns for Nader in 2004 compared to 2000 and 1996, one can witness demographic continuity in the midst of substantial numerical change. The elements of continuity are typically of the most theoretical interest, as they can suggest hypotheses about two-party system erosion, as well as latent or emergent areas of independent/alternative party support. From the earliest work on “third” parties by Fred Haynes (1925) to V.O. Key’s (1958) seminal discussion on “the place of minor parties,” region has been a reliable, if persistently unaccounted for, factor in alternative party voting in America. At the same time, in looking at the figures for Nader below, one must keep in mind that the patterns are sometimes subtle and rest on the movement of a very small number of voters. They are also

complicated by variations in ballot access law across the states. In only 19 did Nader qualify as a party or independent candidate in all three elections.

**Figure 4** displays the mean state-level vote for Nader sorted by his ballot access status in each of nine geographic divisions, as defined by the U.S. Census Bureau.<sup>12</sup> The top set of bars in each graph are the averages for states where Nader made it on the ballot as a party or independent in all three elections, 1996, 2000 and 2004; the bottom set represents states where he had dropped off at least once.

#### *Growth in 2000*

To get a sense of Nader's decline, one needs to consider first his initial rise between 1996 and 2000. The New England states saw the most dramatic movement in this period, with Nader surging in states like Rhode Island (from 1.5 to 6.1 percent), and New Hampshire, where he was unqualified in 1996 but took a pivotal 3.9 percent as a Green four years later. (Bush defeated Gore there by less than 1.3 percentage points.) In Vermont, a traditional hotbed for alternative voting, he more than tripled his tally to take nearly 7 percent in 2000; in Democratic dominant Massachusetts, he went from a microscopic vote as a write-in to 6.4 percent.

His growth was steadier in the five Pacific states, due to progressive issue networks and alternative electoral activity that had been building in the region for years (Collet and Hansen 1995). In 1996, he was qualified in four of the states as a Green; in Washington, he was on as an Independent. He went from 3 percent across the region in 1996 to almost 5 percent in 2000, seeing his vote go as high as 10 percent in Alaska and 6 percent in Hawai'i. He had grown respectably in California, taking 2.3 percent in 1996 and nearly 4 percent in 2000, and Oregon, it seemed, was becoming a crucial stop on the Nader campaign map. His 5 percent there in 2000, it was thought, played a role in the nail biter that saw Gore prevail by 0.4 percentage points.

Nader also grew in the largely Republican, but traditionally independent, Mountain region. With one exception, Montana had voted GOP in every presidential election since 1964;

solidly Republican Utah, in fact, was one of only two states where Ross Perot finished second in 1992. Nader failed to get on Montana's ballot in 1996, but took nearly 6 percent in 2000. In Utah, he climbed from less than 1 percent to 4.7 percent. Colorado was not a prominent Nader state in 1996, but became one in 2000, where he took over 5 percent. His support in New Mexico was modest, but his 3.5 percent there again made Election Night 2000 an uncomfortable one for Democrats. Gore won it by less than 0.1 percent.

==Insert Figure 4: Mean Nader Vote across Census Divisions, 1996-2004==

Nader's performance in 1996 and 2000 was spotty in the Midwest, stagnant to non-existent in the South. In the former, he was largely a write-in in 1996, but four years later took over 3 percent in Kansas, Nebraska, and Wisconsin, and over 5 percent in Minnesota following Jesse Ventura's shock in the 1998 race for governor. The South was a more difficult proposition. In Georgia, North Carolina and Oklahoma, Nader struggled just to get a place on the ballot. In Virginia and Texas, he barely cracked 2 percent of the 2000 vote. It was ironic, then, that his 1.6 percent in Florida would come to have such significance; in the 39 states where he was on the ballot as a party candidate in 2000, he had gotten a higher percentage of the vote in 32 of them. After Florida, his five lowest vote totals that year were all in the South: Kentucky, South Carolina, Arkansas, Louisiana and, at the bottom, Gore's home state of Tennessee, where Nader won less than 1 percent.

### *The 2004 Collapse*

To say the bloom had worn off Nader's rose by 2004 would be a poetic understatement of the results, because no matter how the candidate might hope to frame it, his movement suffered a considerable setback. As witnessed in Figure 4, and more succinctly in **Figure 5**, the declines were profound across the most important constituencies he had established in the two prior elections: in the Pacific, where he had ballot access problems, his vote dropped by more than 5

percentage points; in New England, where he, for the most part, made the ballot, but saw his vote plummet by a similar margin; in the Mountain states, where Nader also saw an above-average drop. His decline was generally higher in the smallest states (defined in Figure 5 as those with 3 to 6 electors), like Vermont (from 6.9 to 1.4 percent), Utah (4.7 to 1.2 percent) and New Hampshire (3.9 to less than 1 percent), than in larger ones. And he dropped more precipitously in Gore and Kerry states than in states won by Bush, perhaps further indication of liberal alienation and the tactical efforts to keep him off the ballot. Too, it seems as if Nader may have suffered without the Green Party label. He fell harder in states where he was on as party candidate in 2000 than in states where he was an Independent.

==Insert Figure 5: Average Percentage Point Decline in Nader Vote, 2000 to 2004, by Selected Subgroup==

### *The Nader Vote, the Democratic Vote and Recent Alternative Campaigns*

More than his raw numbers, which have never approached those of past important major party alternatives, the significance of Nader has lied in his ability to affect the competition between the Republicans and Democrats – that is, to tip the balance of state-level outcomes (and ultimately the Electoral College) in favor of one over the other. Conventional wisdom, of course, has overwhelmingly considered Nader’s effect to be greater on Democratic candidates, suggesting, at the ecological level, a positive relationship between his vote and that for Kerry and Gore. Academic analyses, however, have suggested a more complex situation (e.g., Burden 2003; Herron and Lewis 2004) – and Nader himself has maintained that, if he has any impact at all on the major parties, it is indiscriminate.

At the most basic level, the data support his claim. When the Nader vote in 2004 and 2000 is plotted in a simple linear form against the vote for Kerry and Gore, one sees virtually no relationship at the national level (**Figure 6**). In the graph labeled “Total” – that is, all states where Nader was on the ballot in 2000 and 2004 – the regression lines are flat and the data fit

poorly, largely because Nader does best in states where the Democratic vote is both extremely low and extremely high. (If the equation were computed in quadratic form, one would instead see a u-shaped curve). Considered, instead, in terms of major party competition, the vote for Nader tends to *increase* as the difference between the two parties *decreases*. This was evident in 2000 and it continued in 2004.

==Insert Figure 6: Scatterplots of Nader and Kerry/Gore Vote, 2000 to 2004, by Region==

As we investigate by region, however, things change. In the Midwest and West, the slopes of the regression lines edge downward in 2000 (Midwest:  $m=-2.47$ ,  $t=-1.05$ ,  $p=.32$ ; West:  $m=2.52$ ,  $t=-1.84$ ,  $p=.10$ ), and the negative relationship appears to strengthen in 2004 as the adjusted r-squared for the model increases from .01 and .19 in the two regions, respectively, to .44 and .43. But in the East, the slopes are positive: weakly and insignificantly in 2000 ( $m=.49$ ,  $t=0.41$ ,  $p=.69$ , adj.  $R^2=.04$ ), then becoming stronger and significant in 2004 ( $m=8.39$ ,  $t=3.04$ ,  $p=.03$ , adj.  $R^2=.58$ ). In the South, where, Nader has typically done poorly, we nonetheless see positive slopes in both elections, even as the overall fit to the data remains weaker than in the East (adj.  $R^2=.25$  in 2000 and .26 in 2004). Given this, it seems understandable why intense scrutiny followed Nader's role in Florida and New Hampshire in 2000, even if significant questions persist about whether he, in fact, contributed to Bush's victory in both states. Although Kerry was able to win New Hampshire in 2004, had he been as excruciatingly close as Gore in Florida, it seems likely that the scrutiny on Nader would have continued, with his image as marginal election broker – spoiler, if you will – firmly intact.

Instead, we are left to consider Nader's vote in 2004 relative to other alternative candidates in recent history, including his own. In **Figure 7**, we display overlaid simple two-way plots of Nader's 2004 vote at the county level regressed on his 1996 and 2000 vote as well the vote for two Reform Party candidates: Ross Perot in 1996 and Patrick Buchanan in 2000. What we notice first is that, in every region, the slopes are positive and significant (equations omitted); the tendency to vote for alternative candidates in the present can be partially explained by the

vote for alternatives in the past (Collet and Wattenberg 1999). This remains so even for campaigns as seemingly divergent in ideology as Nader's and Buchanan's were in 2000.

==Insert Figure 7: Scatterplots of County Level Nader Vote in 2004 by the Vote for Recent Alternative Candidates, 1996-2004==

What about the stability of Nader's constituency over time? As his vote in 1996 was a strong predictor of his national support in 2000 (Collet and Hansen 2002; Burden 2003), his vote in 2000 was a weaker overall indicator of his 2004 vote (adj.  $R^2$ : .24). Regional continuity in Nader's support would seem to be most evident in the New England counties, as well as through parts of the South. The ability to analyze his situation in the West is hampered by his inability to get on the ballot in California, Oregon and Hawaii; in the Mountain states plus Washington and Alaska, however, his 2004 vote lines up more solidly with Perot's in 1996 and Buchanan's in 2000 than with either of his two prior runs for the presidency. Similarly, in the Midwest (plot omitted from Figure 7), the most significant relationship is with the vote for Buchanan (adj.  $R^2$ : .29).

### **Nader's Legacy**

In his last public appearance of the 2004 campaign, Nader met with a small gathering in the dimly lit basement of the Capitol View Library in Southwest Washington. There to protest the low priority placed on maintaining public libraries, the quiet event seemed somehow appropriate as the denouement of his third presidential run. He was asked by one journalist whether his candidacy was worth it. "Of course," he replied. "The fight for justice is always worth it. What's the alternative, surrender?"

In an increasingly rigid and competitive two party system, the question, intended as rhetorical, is worth pondering. Nader's candidacy in 2004 not only came to symbolize the near impossibility of qualifying for the ballot as an independent in fifty-plus-one states, but also the

self-fulfilling prophecy of centering a campaign around the ambiguous theme of one's own futile crusade: fighting the system itself. In 1996, and particularly in 2000, Nader deftly tapped into progressive frustration that built during the Clinton years, and did so under the banner of a growing, futuristically-minded – and at that point largely unknown – Green Party. The message, though critical, remained upbeat. By 2004, having heard the spoiler scenario repeated countless times, Americans were unconvinced that Nader could do anything other than hurt the Democrats. His campaign was, by definition, a negative from the beginning.

As our analysis shows, the younger, single, well-educated liberals that animated Nader's previous runs abandoned him and consolidated behind Kerry. He suffered without Green Party ballot access, particularly in the Pacific states, and saw his vote collapse everywhere – most significantly in the New England and Mountain regions where he had done (in a relative sense) well in 2000. His support became more diverse, with more Republicans and conservatives, but increasingly tenuous: less inspired by Nader as a person, less inclined to know about, or agree with many of his issue positions and, most importantly, less likely to vote. In contrast to the movement of progressive “raiders” that seemed to grow naturally out of his 1970s anti-corporate crusades, the Nader constituency today is something akin to a disparate, expressive, and possibly perpetuating, “other” vote.<sup>13</sup> Nader's predictions of anti-establishment, conservative support proved somewhat accurate, even if the size of that constituency – or the willingness of its Republican siblings to abandon the Party in another close election – were grossly exaggerated.

From the standpoint of building continued support for fundamental changes in national party politics, the Nader campaign in 2004 will be looked upon as a setback. Despite making an explicit appeal to unify alternatives into a single crusade, Nader eschewed the Greens and disdained their nominating system; his only claim was to the vestiges of a barely existent Reform Party. He suffered as a result. He not only lost the opportunity for ballot access in the Pacific and other regions, but undermined his own party-building principles. Like Ventura, he could be seen as a party wrecker. Like Anderson and Perot, his once serious persona was transformed by

the American presidential process into a national punchline. And with him, some might argue, went some of his most relevant issues: the role of money in politics, access to presidential debates, changes to the electoral system. The opportunity for widespread procedural reform that emerged after the vote counting debacle of 2000 may have been lost.

Was Ralph Nader merely a phenomenon created by an era of historically competitive elections? Or is there a substantive legacy for his three presidential campaigns? At the very least, it may be said that Nader has kept light on alternative politics in a post-Perot era where otherwise it might have been overshadowed by intense major-partisanship. It may also be said that the light he brought by 2004 cast dark shadows. But even if his vote seems increasingly unstable and peripheral, our analysis suggests a geographic base nonetheless remains for any challenger to the major parties – primarily in New England states and in parts of the West. Significant numbers of young voters remained with Nader in 2004 and would seemingly be attracted to him or a visible successor. Further, through his national effort to gain ballot access, he helped to expose to a new voting generation the extraordinary barriers (and undermining tactics) faced by those who want a chance to compete. Losing an election – not to mention a reputation – seems a taxing way to prove the point, but the point was nonetheless made.

Will Nader continue? The answer, in and of itself, seems irrelevant, perhaps as irrelevant as his 2000 campaign might have been if the election were not so excruciatingly close. Future close elections may continue to compel him. Few precedents exist, however, for a four-time minor party presidential candidate to improve his standing among the American public. The only one to do so was Socialist Eugene Debs in 1912, a year in which Teddy Roosevelt led the Progressives out of the Republican Party and threw the system into temporary chaos. So the deeper question, rather, is not about Nader, but whether *any* alternative candidate of national stature will be willing to endure the process of running for president in such a climate – or to run with a constituency that can only alter an outcome, not win an election. In 1968 or 1992, following landslides, Americans could accept the idea of an outsider throwing a wrench into the

system. In 2004, they could not. Should Nader inspire someone more popular than him to do so in 2008, and not surrender, it may be one of his most significant legacies.

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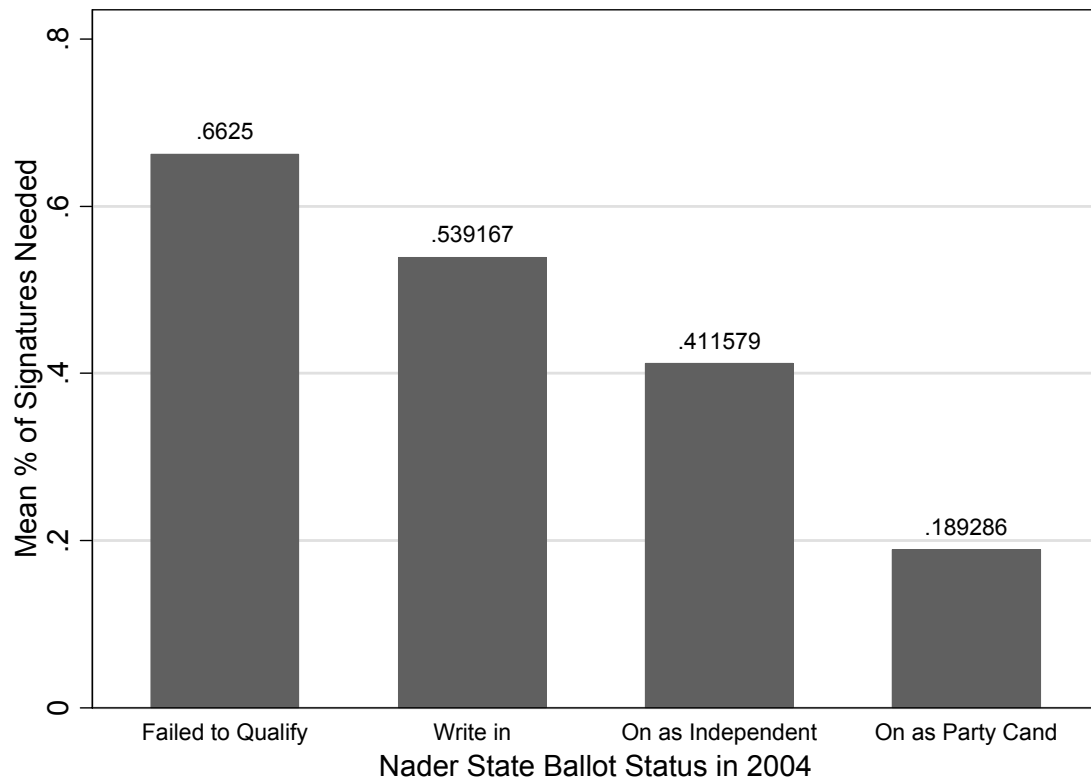
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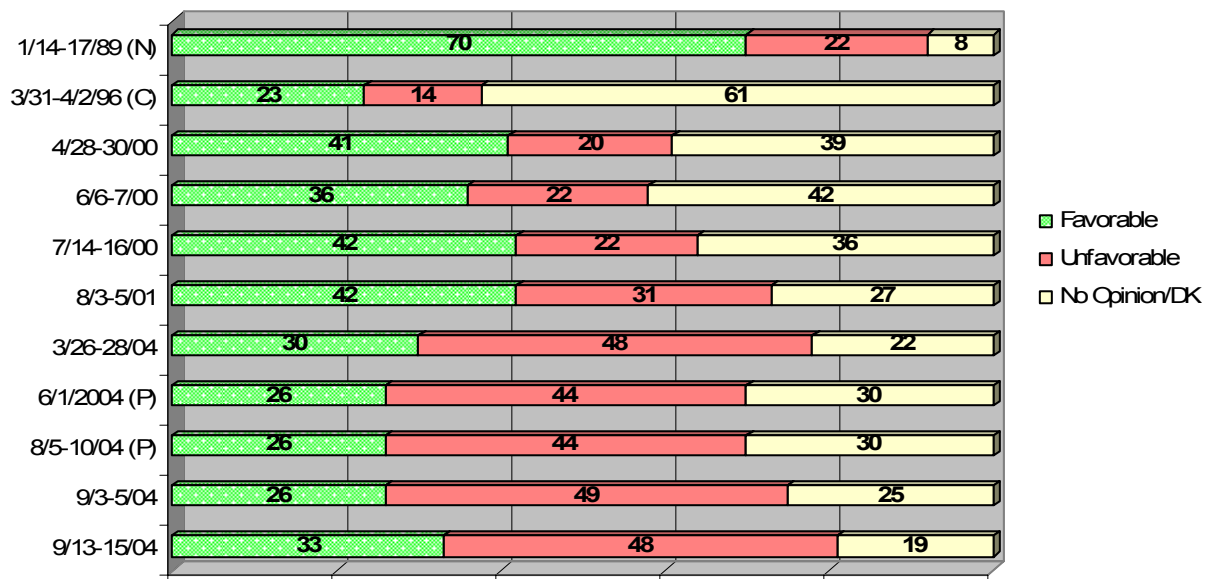
## Figures

**Figure 1: Mean State Signature Requirements by Nader Ballot Status in 2004**



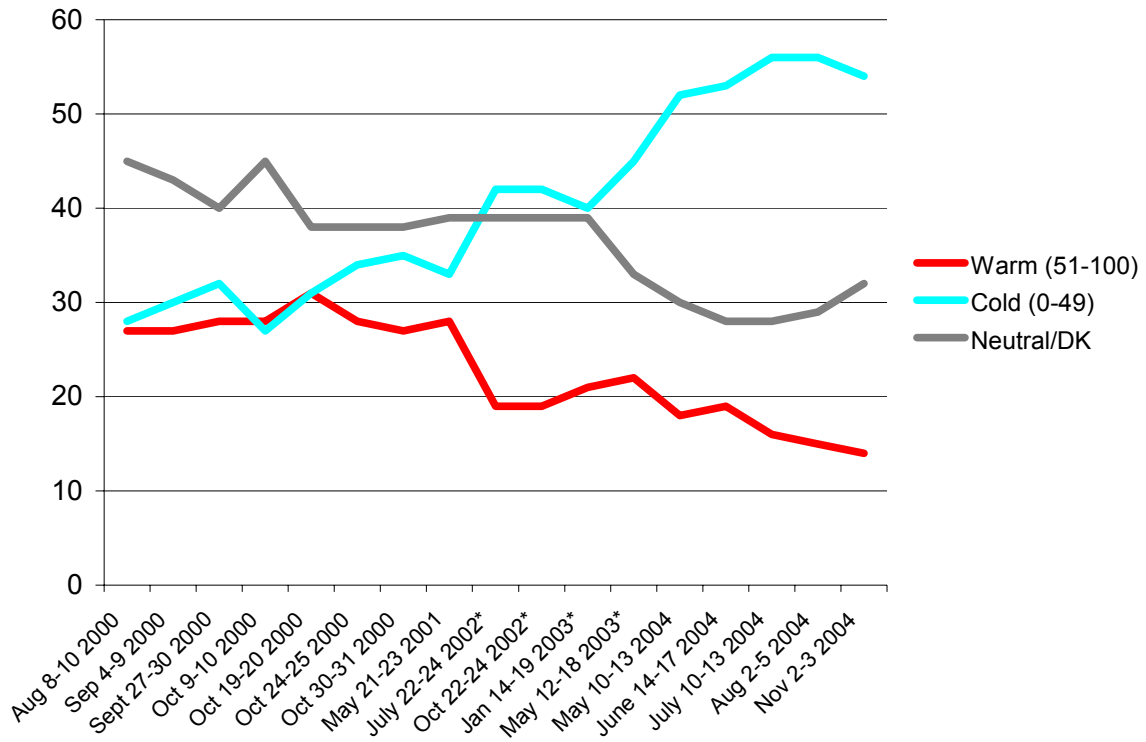
Sources: Signature requirements from Winger (2005); Nader ballot access coding by authors, derived from information provided by the Federal Elections Commission.

**Figure 2: Favorable/Unfavorable Ratings of Ralph Nader, 1989-2004**



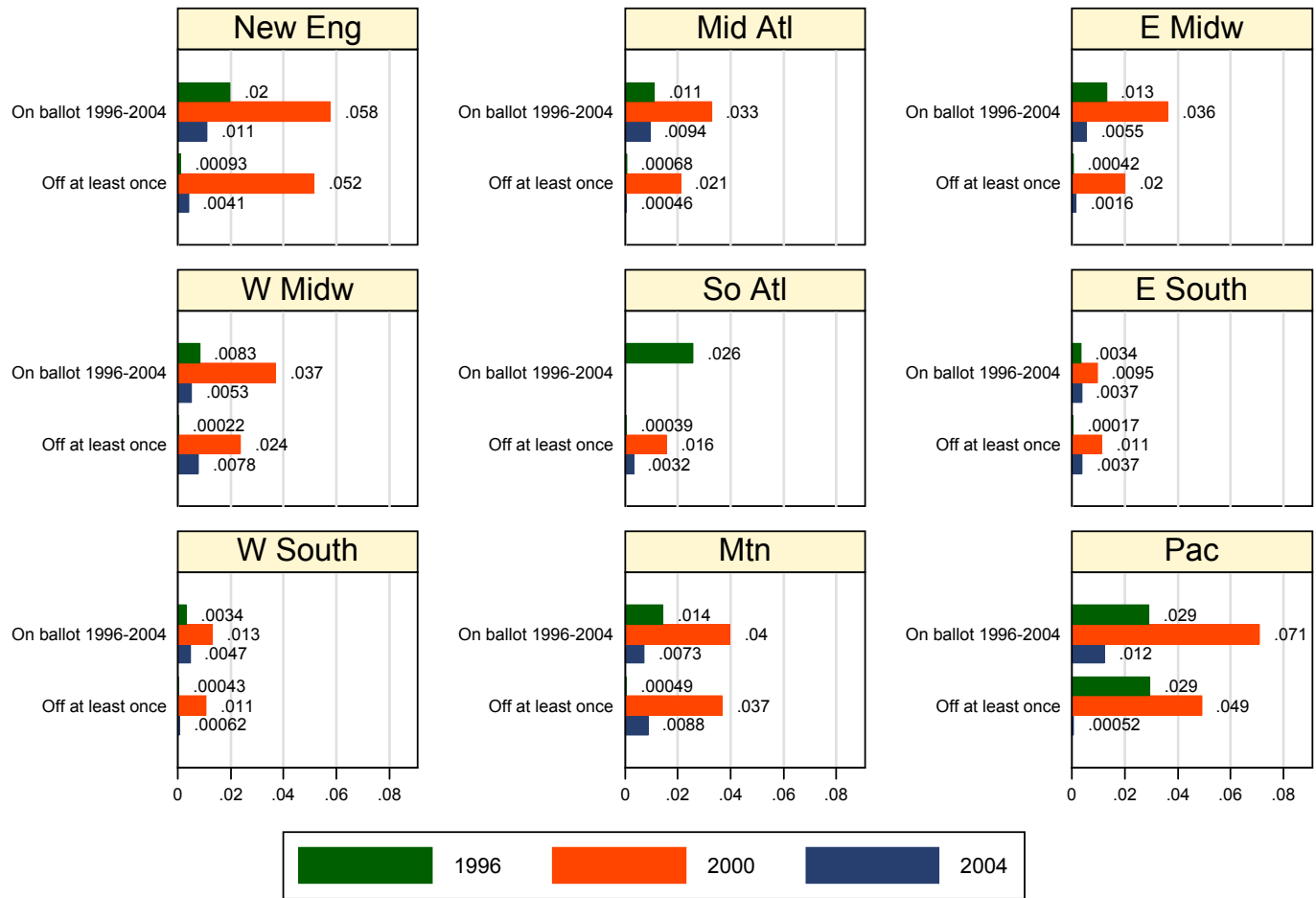
Notes: All polls conducted by Gallup of American adults, 18 years and over, except as noted: (N) NBC News/*Wall Street Journal* Poll; (C) CBS News/*New York Times* Poll; (P) Pew Center.

**Figure 3: Democracy Corps Poll Feeling Thermometers:  
“Ralph Nader” and “Green Party/Ralph Nader’s Party” (\*),  
August 2000-November 2004**



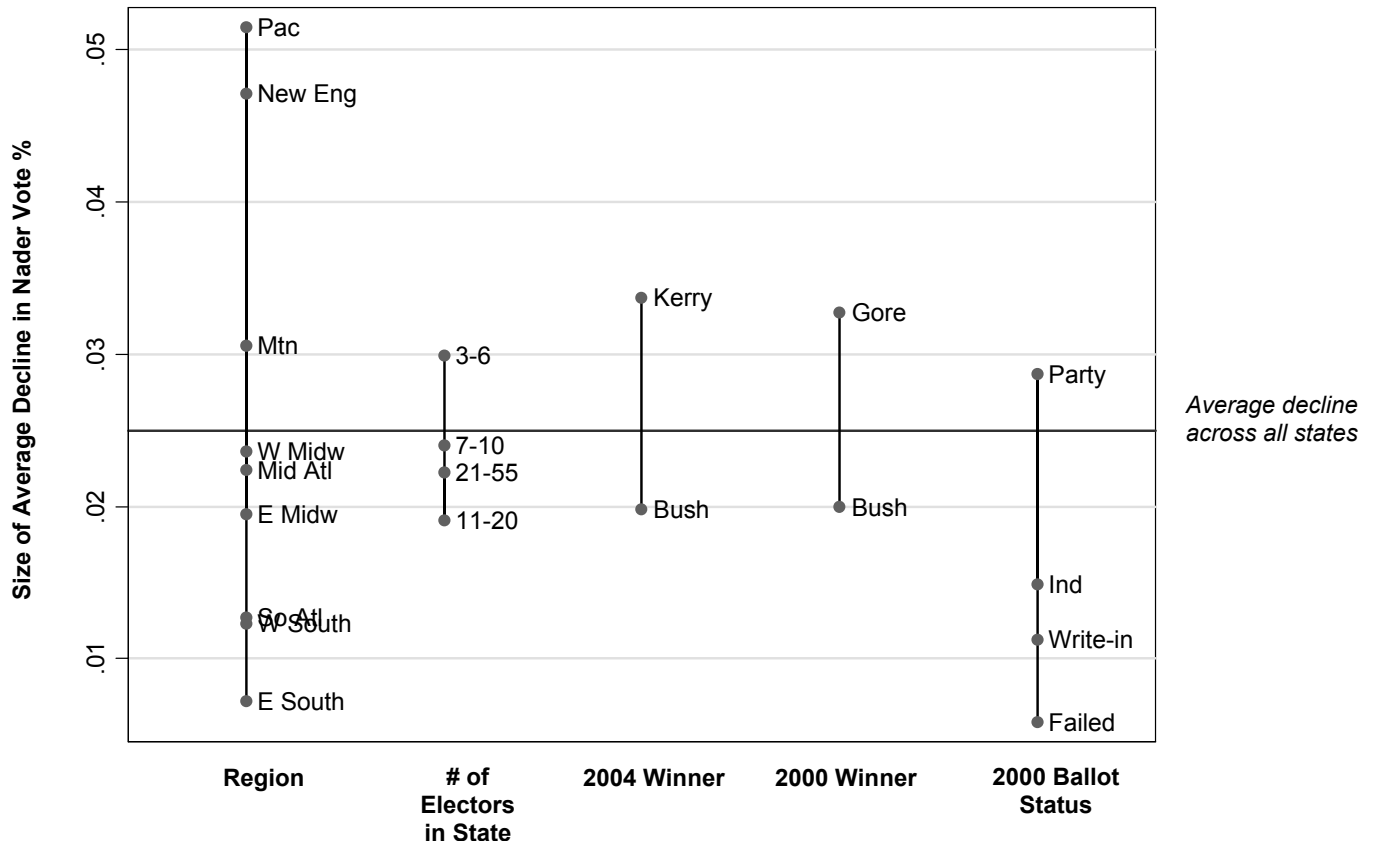
Notes: All polls conducted by Greenberg, Quinlan and Rosner Associates. All samples are of registered likely voters, with the exception of post-election day survey taken on November 2-3, 2004 which is of voters who participated in that election, N varies from 988 to 1,027 for the former, 2,000 for the latter. Data points noted by (\*) indicate question wording was modified to “Green Party/Ralph Nader’s Party.” See footnote 3 for the actual question wording.

**Figure 4: Mean Nader Vote across Census Divisions, 1996-2004**



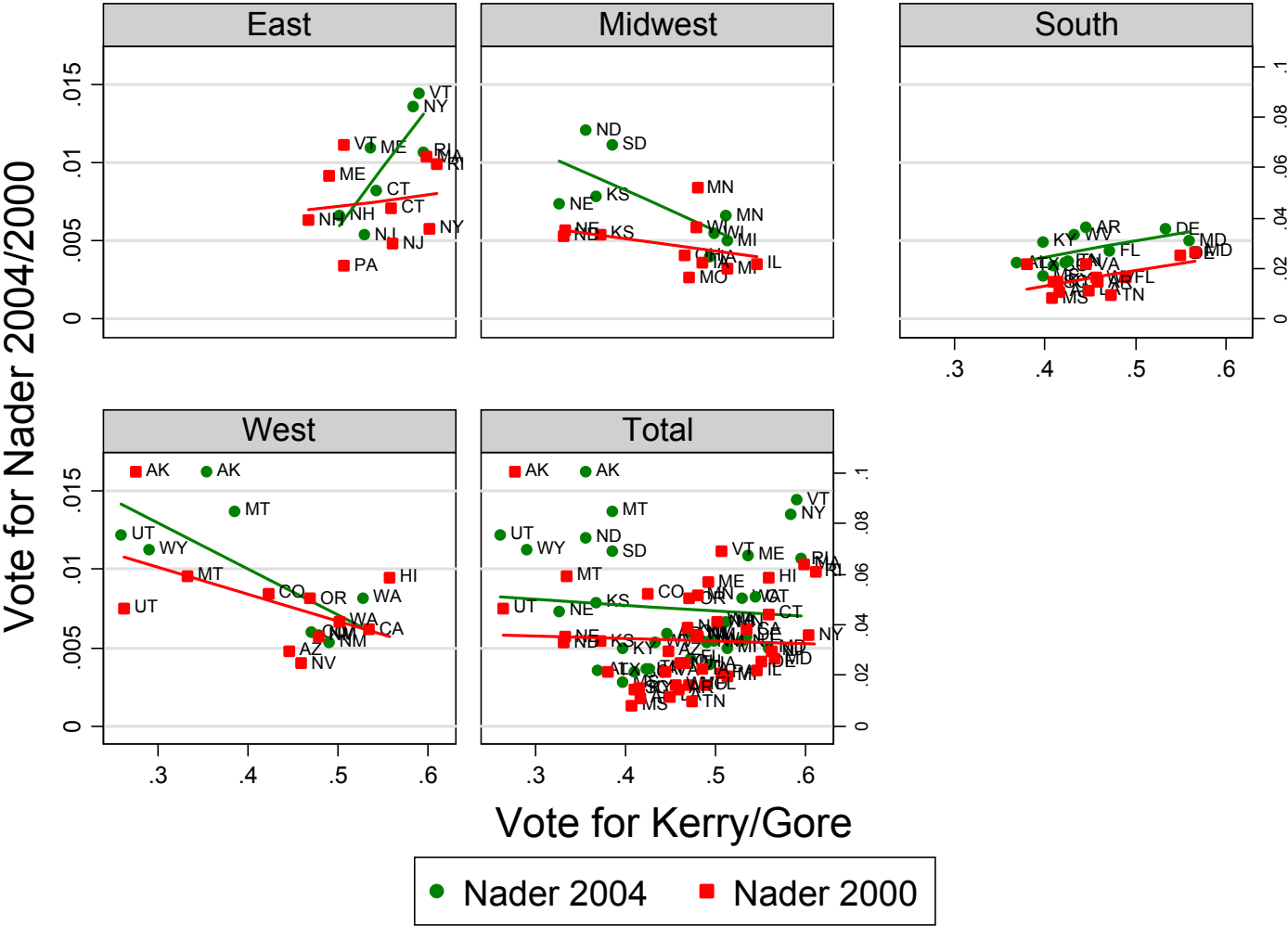
Notes: “On ballot 1996-2004”=States where Nader appeared on ballot as party or independent candidate in each of the 1996, 2000 and 2004 elections. “Off at least once”= States where Nader appeared as a write-in or failed to qualify in at least one of the three elections.

**Figure 5: Average Percentage Point Declines in Nader Vote 2000 to 2004, by Selected Subgroup**



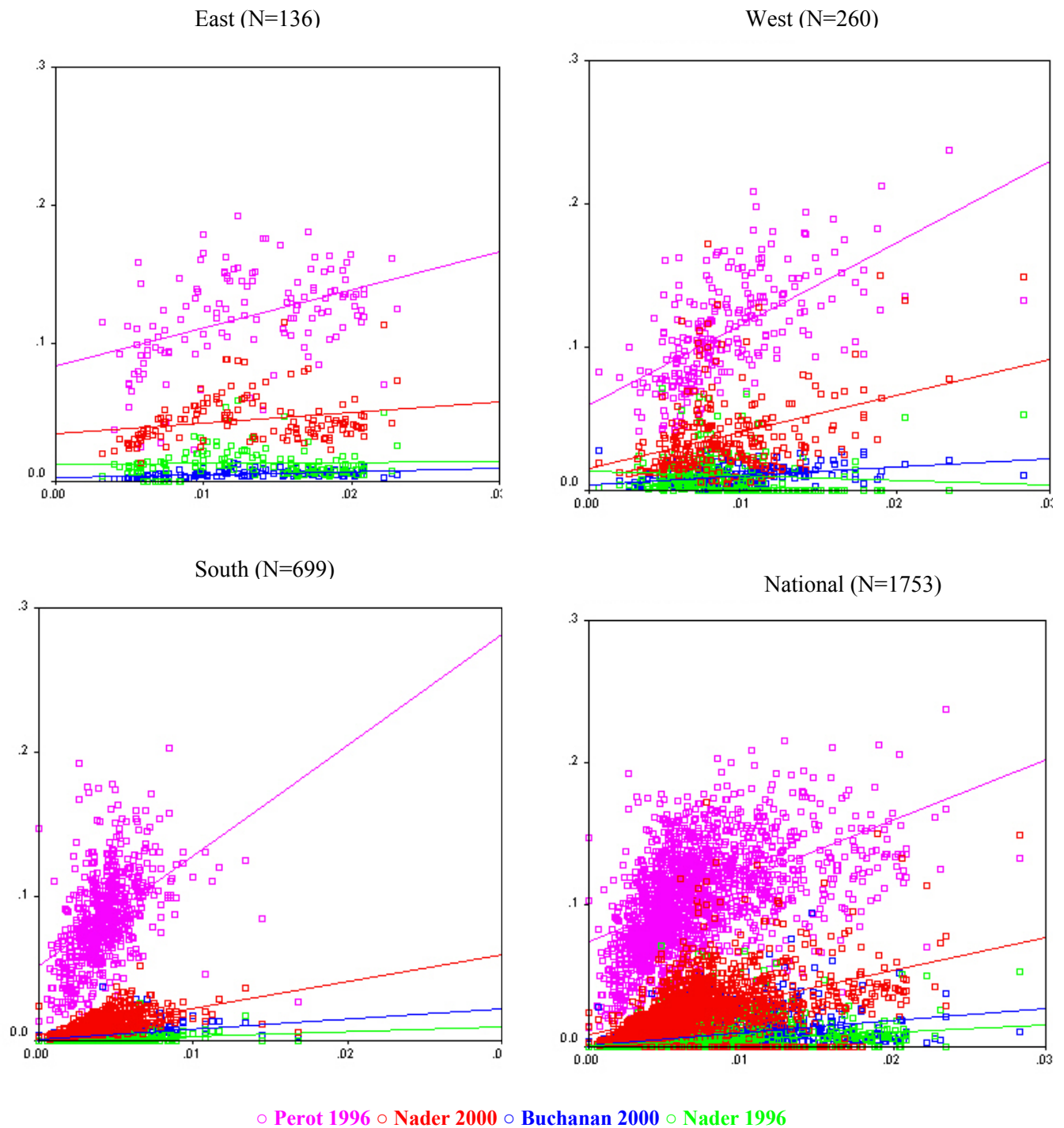
Notes: Region categories derived from U.S. Census. States where Nader was eligible for votes in 2004, including write-in, are included.

**Figure 6: Relationship between State-Level Nader Vote and Democratic Candidate Vote, 2004 and 2000, by Census Region and US Total**



Note: Nader 2000 vote plotted on right axis to facilitate visual comparison.

**Figure 7: Scatterplots of County-Level 2004 Nader Vote by Recent Alternative Candidacies**



## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> There are exceptions (e.g., Green and Binning 2002), including valuable work by Ron Rapoport and Walt Stone (forthcoming) on the movement of minor party activists over time.

<sup>2</sup> Rosenstone and his colleagues explain: “third party candidates run to gain votes, not to affect election outcomes. If nationally prestigious candidates were mounting campaigns in an effort to change outcomes, then close presidential elections – when a shift of a few votes to a third party candidate could make a big difference in who wins – would prompt them to run. But just the opposite holds: nationally prestigious [third party] politicians appear after landslides, not cliffhangers.” (1996: 201)

<sup>3</sup> According to the Party, as of August 2005, there were 224 elected Greens in 27 states, none higher than the county supervisorial level ([www.feinstein.org/greenparty/electeds.html](http://www.feinstein.org/greenparty/electeds.html)).

<sup>4</sup> Winger aptly notes that signature requirements are merely one barometer of ballot access, and may overlook other significant hurdles such as signature notarization requirements, circulation windows and restrictions on who can circulate petitions (2005).

<sup>5</sup> Anti-Nader sites and ad information was taken from Democracy in Action, a website maintained by Eric Appleman, at [www.gwu.edu/~action/2004/nader.html](http://www.gwu.edu/~action/2004/nader.html).

<sup>6</sup> *Roper Report 76-10*. Survey taken November 6-11, 1976, N=2002. Question: “Here’s another card with a list of words and phrases on it. Would you call off all of them that describe your feelings about Ralph Nader?” Accessed via R-POLL, the Roper Center online database available through LEXIS/NEXIS Academic Universe.

<sup>7</sup> Survey taken January 14-17, 1989, N=2025. Question: “In general, do you have a favorable or unfavorable opinion of Ralph Nader?” Accessed via R-POLL.

<sup>8</sup> In contrast to the surveys presented in Figure 1, the Democracy Corps polls are of likely registered voters or registrants who had already voted. Question: “I’d like to rate your feelings toward some people and organizations, with 100 meaning a very warm, favorable feeling, zero meaning a very cold, unfavorable feeling, and 50 meaning not particularly warm or cold. You can use any number from 0 to 100, the higher the number the more favorable your feelings are toward that person or organization. If you have no opinion or never heard of that person or organization, please say so. Ralph Nader. Give...Ralph Nader a rating, with 100 meaning a very warm favorable feeling, zero meaning a very cold, unfavorable feeling, and 50 meaning not particularly warm or cold.”

<sup>9</sup> Along with a nearly universal public perception that he ruined Al Gore’s chance of keeping the presidency in Democratic control, there are several smaller events that may have slowly influenced the turn in public opinion on Nader. In mid-2001, James Carville began to openly attack Nader at Democratic gatherings; at the same time, Nader continued to draw thousands to his rallies and generally positive media for the launch of his “Democracy Rising” movement and his book, *Crashing the Party*. From 2002, however, his press turned increasingly negative. In June of that year, he was roundly attacked for criticizing NBA officiating in a controversial playoff game between the Los Angeles Lakers and Sacramento Kings and again, in mid 2003, for asking 18 year old Cleveland Cavaliers rookie LeBron James to take a stand against third world sweatshops. Such issues, it seemed, fell out of the purview of a presidential candidate during a non-election season. In January 2003, Al Sharpton and Dennis Kucinich began to campaign for the presidency – in Sharpton’s case, explicitly in pursuit of Nader’s progressive constituency.

<sup>10</sup> Surveys released by the Annenberg Public Policy Center at the University of Pennsylvania provide insight. Democrats went from 21% to 40% “unfavorable” (net: +19%), followed by two core left constituencies: union households (+19%) and African Americans (+18%). Americans with a college education, in 2000, were 36% favorable and 29% unfavorable toward Nader in 2000 – one of his strongest groups. By 2004, Nader’s favorables among college grads sunk to 21% and his unfavorables soared to 47%. Liberals and Americans aged 18-29 showed similar patterns (National Annenberg Election Survey 2004).

<sup>11</sup> Burden (2003), however, notes an exception in this regard pertaining to Nader in 2000.

<sup>12</sup> The divisions are defined as follows. “New England” includes Connecticut, Maine, Massachusetts, New Hampshire, Rhode Island and Vermont; “Middle Atlantic” includes New Jersey, New York and Pennsylvania; “East North Central” includes Indiana, Illinois, Michigan, Ohio, Wisconsin; “West North Central” includes Iowa, Kansas, Minnesota, Missouri, Nebraska, North Dakota and South Dakota; “South

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Atlantic” includes Delaware, District of Columbia, Florida, Georgia, Maryland, North Carolina, South Carolina, Virginia, West Virginia; “East South Central” includes Alabama, Kentucky, Mississippi, Tennessee; “West South Central” includes Arkansas, Louisiana, Oklahoma and Texas; “Mountain” includes Arizona, Colorado, Idaho, New Mexico, Montana, Utah, Nevada and Wyoming; “Pacific” includes Alaska, Washington, Oregon, California and Hawaii. “New England” and “Middle Atlantic” combine to form the “Northeast” region; “East North Central” and “West North Central” combine to form the “Midwest” region; “South Atlantic”, “West South Central” and “East South Central” combine to form the “South” region; and “Mountain” and “Pacific” combine to form the “West” region.

<sup>13</sup> In an unpublished paper based on a large panel of Nader voters gathered by Knowledge Networks, Hillygass (2002) notes that those who were most “expressive” – defined as being more averse to the major party candidates and less favorable toward the Clinton presidency – were less likely to abandon Nader during the course of the 2000 campaign.