

In Defense of Tactical Voting (Sometimes)

May 27, 2010

The November election poses a dilemma for leftists. Both major parties embrace the agenda of corporate America. Neither challenges the assumptions of American empire, and politics as usual will be followed by a Washington regime that will be at best agnostic toward the needs of progressive social movements if not hostile to it. Against this, Ralph Nader is again launching a crusade against both parties. But the Republican administration of George Bush is seen by many as a seismic step to the right, leading even such an inveterate radical critic as Noam Chomsky to declare his support for the Democratic candidate. Three editors of New Politics — Stephen Shalom, Thomas Harrison, and Michael Hirsch — offer three perspectives on the difficult choices faced by the left. Readers are invited to respond.

I am going to make an argument for voting for the lesser evil, not always, but sometimes, and in particular this time — in some states. Maybe.

Let me immediately make some stipulations to save pointless posturing. I accept as self-evident that the Democratic Party is a capitalist party and beholden to corporate interests. It is a party of empire. The Democratic Party will not lead us to socialism and only socialism offers a long-term solution to our problems. In short, the Democratic Party is evil — if it weren't, the question of voting for the lesser evil would not arise.

Now not everyone on the left who thinks the Democrats are evil agrees that they are the *lesser* evil. One version holds that the two parties are equivalently evil, that their policies are indistinguishable. After all, didn't the Democrats vote for the Patriot Act and the Iraq war, didn't Clinton gut welfare and push through a repressive crime bill? But there are two flaws in this claim of equivalence.

First, as a matter of simple logic, to show equivalence between the two parties it's not enough to show that on some issues or even on many issues the two parties have the same position. Equivalence means that they are the same on all issues, not just some. For all their similarities, the two parties *don't* have the same position on abortion, on affirmative action, on same-sex marriage, on the minimum wage, on environmental protection, on overtime pay, on taxation, on resuming nuclear testing, and a host of other issues. Yes, of course the Democrats' position on these issues is not what we would want them to be — remember the stipulation: they are evil — but sustaining *Roe v. Wade* is better than reversing it, even if the Democrats won't push for public funding for all reproductive health care, and indeed for all health care. Opposing a constitutional amendment enshrining heterosexual marriage is better than favoring such an amendment, even if most Democrats won't endorse same-sex marriage. And so on.

One could argue, of course, that even though the Democrats and the Republicans are not identical, the differences are so minor as to be *essentially* equivalent, if not actually equivalent. That is, the differences don't matter. But think about the implications of this argument. This argument means that we are saying to African Americans "it doesn't matter to us, it is of no consequence, whether or not you have jobs"; we are saying to women "it doesn't matter to us, it is of no consequence, whether or not you have the right to safe and legal abortions"; we are saying to the poor "it doesn't matter to us, it is of no consequence, whether or not you get overtime pay or an increased minimum wage." Yes, one could object that this isn't what is being said — that's what's actually being said is that *compared to what's really needed*, these minor reforms are irrelevant. But small reforms can mean an immense reduction of human suffering today, while we're waiting for the promise of more thorough-going change in the future. For people living on the edge — as so many

are under modern capitalism — the differences between having the right to legal abortion or not, an increased minimum wage or not, less arsenic in drinking water or not — are not at all irrelevant, and may indeed be matters of life and death.

Moreover, consider the implications for our political work of the claim that the differences between the parties are meaningless. If we truly believed that the parties were the same, then we'd also believe that all those progressives working for abortion rights, or defending affirmative action, or working to increase workers' benefits, or protecting the environment were wasting their time. Not just that as liberals — without an understanding of the necessity for socialism — they don't fully appreciate the limits of the reforms they seek. But that their work is literally irrelevant. Certainly this hasn't been the approach of *New Politics*. Twice a year we publish a 200-page issue and if all we needed to say was that the problem is the lack of socialism and the solution is socialism, we could save ourselves a lot of unnecessary editorial work.

Some argue that the difference between Republicans and Democrats is that the former are open about their desire to subordinate all to the rule of capital, while the latter have the same goal but cover it better with humanitarian rhetoric. Better to have the up-front reactionary — goes the argument — rather than the disguised reactionary. At least you know what you're getting and can better confront it.[1] If every difference between Democrats and Republicans were entirely cosmetic, then this argument would have some force. But the differences are not entirely cosmetic. If the way the Democrats try to "sugarcoat" capitalism is by paying a higher minimum wage or making taxes less regressive, then let us have sugarcoating. Of course our job as leftists is to point out the inadequacies of that sugarcoating and to push for more — but not to tell people to reject the higher minimum wage or more progressive taxes because they're just cosmetic. I assume if we can convince workers that having more money is a cosmetic irrelevance, then we can convince them as well that even as they accept small reforms, they should fight for more.

There is a second flaw in the argument that says Democrats and Republicans are indistinguishable given examples like the Iraq war and the Patriot Act. While it is true that the Democrats behaved abominably, spinelessly — you can fill in the adverbs — it is not obvious to me that the outcome would have been the same had the Democrats had more power.

In the case of Iraq, a majority of Democrats in the House of Representatives opposed the war resolution of October 2002.[2]

In the Senate, a majority of Democrats (including Kerry) voted for the resolution, but a majority of Democrats (again including Kerry) also voted for an amendment that would have made war difficult to wage, limiting the authorization to permit war in case of "imminent threat" to the United States, rather than of "the continuing threat." [3] More to the point, it seems extremely unlikely that the war would even have been proposed under a Gore or Kerry presidency (given that it probably wouldn't have been proposed even under a mainstream GOP administration, such as that of Bush senior).

The Patriot Act probably would have passed under any Democratic or Republican president, but the fact that Kerry now wants to amend the legislation in a less repressive direction while Bush wants to extend it in a more repressive direction does not suggest equivalence.

And on the Bush tax bill, where House Republicans were unanimously in favor, Democrats were more than 5-1 against.[4]

So I don't think we can accept the claim of Howie Hawkins that "the majority of Democrats in Congress today are voting in support of Bush's economic and military initiatives," with only "a left fringe" of "about 25 representatives" who are opposed to the bipartisan consensus.[5]

I've heard some leftists argue that both the Bush administration and the Democrats want the United States to rule the world, the only difference being that where the Bushies want to use brute military force to achieve this goal, the Democrats want to use the institutions of global capitalism — the World Trade Organization, the International Monetary Fund, and so on — to achieve the same end. But is the difference between these two approaches really of no concern to radicals? Was the multi-million-strong antiwar movement irrelevant because it tried to stop the war rather than

demanding an end to corporate globalization? The latter should be our long-term aim, of course, but stopping a war in the meantime is hardly inconsequential.

Some leftists argue that if we're interested in supporting the lesser evil, the lesser evil is Bush, not Kerry. This argument has two variations. One holds that our best hope for fundamental change is for things to get worse; the second holds that Democrats can enact certain awful policies that Republicans can't get away with. Let me consider each of these in turn.

Gabriel Kolko has suggested,[6] and Alexander Cockburn seems to have endorsed the idea,[7] that the most serious blow against the U.S. empire has been struck by the incompetence and overreach of the Bush administration, alienating its allies as it pursues its unilateralist course. Therefore, if we want to see the empire brought down, we ought to favor the continuation of these self-defeating policies, rather than the more careful and considered imperial policies of a Kerry, policies that might prolong the long-term viability of the empire. This position has two serious weaknesses.

First, it overstates the degree of predictability in human affairs and understates the current dangers. Overreaching sometimes gets its comeuppance, but sometimes it leads to disaster — as discovered by the German Communist Party with its slogan of "after Hitler, us." In a world of nuclear weapons, the militarization of space, and potential environmental catastrophe, we can't afford too many more disasters. Kolko writes "As dangerous as it is, Bush's reelection may be a lesser evil because he is much more likely to continue the destruction of the alliance system that is so crucial to American power." Sure, it may turn out to be the lesser evil, but given the danger that Kolko acknowledges, do we really want to take the chance?

The second problem with the Kolko approach is that it requires us either to be extremely dishonest (publicly opposing war and violence while secretly welcoming every unilateral U.S. bomb dropped) or to appear extremely lunatic (publicly calling for reckless military adventures). Neither seems a winning strategy for the left.

The second variation of the argument that claims the Democrats are actually the *greater* evil points to various policies in history that were enacted by the *less* disposed party because there would have been too much opposition if the *more* disposed party had tried to do so. Nixon was able to make an opening to China because his long record of fanatical anti-Communism shielded him from the right-wing opposition that any Democrat would have faced. Menachim Begin was able to sign the Camp David peace agreement with Egypt because he — unlike the Labor Party — could never be accused of being soft on the Arabs. And Clinton could sign a welfare "reform" bill that, had it been proposed by a Republican, would have elicited a storm of outrage from liberals. There is something to these examples, but their significance can be overstated. Take the welfare bill. In the Senate, Democrats split 25-21[8] in favor of the bill, and in the House Democrats were divided 98-98[9] — quite likely more affirmative votes than if a Republican president had tried to pass the bill. But since all 53 Republican Senators and 230 out of 232 Republican Representatives — majorities in both Houses — voted yea, there's no reason to think a Republican president wouldn't have gotten his way. Or that the contents of the bill wouldn't have been even worse.

Given the arguments I have raised, why shouldn't we all become Democrats? Why shouldn't we devote our hearts and souls to the Democratic Party? The reason is simple: we are radicals; while we want to achieve whatever small, short-run gains we can for people who are suffering, we know how much suffering will still remain and how only fundamental social change offers any hope of seriously addressing the problems we face. If we put all our efforts into supporting the lesser evil then we have no effort left to eliminate evil. As radicals we inevitably face a trade-off between achieving short-run modest improvements and working for the thorough-going changes we know are necessary. There are several reasons why we need to be building political alternatives to the two-party system of corporate capitalism, why we need to pursue radical change even though we know that today radical change is not immediately attainable.

First, even in bad times, we need to keep radical ideas alive. If future activists have to start from

scratch to develop a fundamental critique of existing society and a vision of an alternative, then future change will be that much more difficult. If we falsely encourage people to believe that this Democratic Party band-aid or that liberal program or piece of legislation will solve their problems, then we are misleading them. And we are weakening the case for the long-range fundamental changes that are essential. If we falsely encourage people to believe that John Kerry, for example, has the solution to the problems of war and injustice then we fail in our obligation as leftists to educate people as to the immense limitations of Kerry-style policies.

Second, even in bad times, we need to develop the embryonic institutions and organizations that can later grow and become the vehicles for radical change. Social change doesn't occur in a vacuum; it needs left institutions and organizations to propel it forward. To the extent that our efforts go into building or promoting the institutions and organizations that represent the lesser evil, to that extent we are failing to create the structures for real change. Parties rarely emerge ready to contest state power: it's a long process of building and growing. The process will no doubt involve electoral losses, a painful but necessary step on the path to victory.

Third, it's not just long-run party-building that matters. Most often what determines whether reforms get enacted in the United States is not which of the two main parties officeholders belong to, but the strength of popular movements. It is these movements that forced politicians — Democrats and Republicans — to enact whatever social reforms we do have: labor rights, civil rights, women's rights, and so on. So building these movements must be a central focus of our work.

And fourth, even when our program is currently unattainable, by vigorously promoting it we can often push more mainstream groups further to the left, expanding the boundaries of the possible. Related to this, in conservative times, when the Democrats are invariably moving to the right, pressure from their left may slow or even halt their rightward movement. This benefit, it should be noted, does not depend on any conviction that the Democrats can be induced to become a radical party. The benefit of moving the Democrats modestly leftward is that the result will be marginally less human suffering and marginally more space within which the left can operate.

So what is a leftist to do? There's no automatic formula here. The trade-offs are real, and therefore one has to balance the short-run costs and benefits versus the long-run costs and benefits in each particular situation. If nuclear war or full-fledged fascism were imminent, then it would be mindless moral purism to refuse to address the short-term dangers. If our long-term prospects could be dramatically improved by foregoing short-term benefit, then it would be equally foolish to insist on immediate gratification.

We are faced in the 2004 election with an unusually retrograde Republican administration. It is presiding over one of the largest upward redistributions of wealth in U.S. history, one of the most serious challenges to civil liberties in half a century, and one of the most aggressive foreign policies in years, made more dangerous by Washington's status as the world's sole superpower. But beyond these distinctions, the Bush administration has been manipulating the political system to entrench its hold on power for years to come. Aside from stealing the 2000 presidential election, it has been gerrymandering Congressional districts to give it a lock on the House of Representatives. The only other time since 1933 that the Republicans have controlled both houses of Congress and the White House was in the first two years of the Eisenhower administration, but at least Eisenhower was checked by an unusually liberal Supreme Court. A Bush victory might give the Bushes[10] a firm hold on all three branches of government, and the power to make the conservative Supreme Court even worse, as new judges in the image of Scalia and Thomas will be appointed for life-time terms, with long-lasting implications.

Does this mean we should endorse Kerry? No. It is sometimes assumed that the question before us in this (or any) election is which candidate are we to *endorse*, where endorse means vote for, work for, provide funds for, and speak for. To endorse Kerry — whatever its short-term benefits — would come at an immense cost: We would be using our limited time to canvas for Kerry rather than on building radical movements; we would be expending our scarce financial resources on the corporate-backed Kerry rather than on cash-starved grassroots projects[11]; and our message would

be the false one of trust in Kerry rather than the radical truth that Kerry and the system are fundamentally flawed. In some extreme circumstances, *endorsing* a Kerry-type might be warranted. But that is not the issue before us. The question, rather, is what we should do for fifteen seconds on Election Day and what we should urge like-minded individuals to do on election day. That is, we can vote for Kerry without endorsing him. We can pull the lever for him (or punch out the hanging chad for him, or whatever) while still, in every other respect working for and speaking for radical change.

Money or energy that is diverted from left projects to the Democrats will hurt the left. Education that soft- peddles the flaws of the Democrats will hurt the left. But how will *a vote* that is diverted in 2004 from some left third party candidate to Kerry hurt us?

1. In some situations, a vote for the Democrat could hypothetically prevent a third party candidate from winning the election. That's not relevant in 2004.
2. A vote for a Democrat could hypothetically prevent a third party from obtaining some crucial proportion of the popular vote that entitles the party to political benefits in the future. Nader didn't come close to doing this in 2000, and it seems extremely unlikely that the Greens will come close in the more polarized election of 2004.
3. A vote for a Democrat could reduce the total going to a third party candidate, thus detracting from the message of that candidate. But, I doubt that the credibility of Nader's message in 2000 would have suffered very much had he received ten percent fewer votes (or that the message's credibility would have been much enhanced if he had received ten percent more votes). On the other hand, those extra quarter million votes might have made a big difference to Gore — not in terms of popular vote, but, if cast in the right states, in terms of winning the election. Put another way, the marginal benefit of a vote for a third party candidate in a winner-take-all system who has no chance of winning is close to zero; while the marginal benefit of that same vote to a major party candidate could be the difference between winning and losing.

Of course, U.S. presidential elections are decided by electoral votes, not by total votes, so the marginal Kerry vote in New York or California in 2004 is worth exactly zero. (Yes, the polls could be wrong, and maybe these states will turn out to be up for grabs, but if so, Kerry doesn't have a chance of winning the election.) Thus, in the "sure" states it makes sense to vote for a third party candidate — better to do something whose impact is close to zero than something whose impact is precisely zero. But in the close states there is little to gain by voting for a third party — since we can still make our same arguments and build our same organizations and movements, while voting for Kerry.

4. There is a final reason for withholding our *vote* — not just our endorsement — from a Democrat. If we make clear that we will automatically cast our ballots for a Democrat then we play into the Democrats' opportunistic move rightward. In a multiparty proportional representation system, any time a mainstream party moves to the right in an attempt to pick up some middle-of-the-road votes, it is likely to lose a corresponding number of votes to more left-wing parties. But in winner-take-all systems like in the United States, the fact that many voters of left-wing disposition don't want to waste their votes on a third party when they could choose the lesser evil means that the Democrats can afford to move to the right without paying an electoral price. So by automatically voting for the lesser evil we make it more likely that

over time the lesser evil will become more and more evil, and perhaps even more evil than the greater evil is today. (The Democratic Party's commitment to the basic principles of the New Deal welfare state, for example, is probably today less firm than was that of the administration of Richard Nixon. Thus, family welfare benefits were nearly twice as high in real dollars in 1970 than they were in 1994, when Democrats controlled the White House and both Houses of Congress[12]; the minimum wage was higher in real terms under Nixon than Clinton.[13])

Now it might be objected that "fortunately" campaign promises don't mean much in the United States, so Kerry is still likely to behave in office better than Bush, even if he campaigns just to Bush's left. This is true: Major party candidates tend to campaign closer to the ideological center than their actual views. But what a politician says during the campaign does place some constraints on the politician's behavior once in office, so keeping candidates from campaigning to the right does matter. And, therefore, we need to be concerned about increasing the costs of their doing so. I will return below to the question of how we can address this concern.

Some urge us to run vigorous third party campaigns in every state because the left needs a presidential candidacy in order to reach people with its political message. But having a candidate does not mean that you can participate in debates. Nor does having a candidate mean you are eligible for free television time. Organizations like MoveOn.org have raised money to wage educational campaigns, without being connected to a candidate. MoveOn's ads are increasingly partisan, but if we thought the radical agenda was best promoted through ads, we could do that without having a candidate. The Greens in fact have often done best by building from the bottom up, not from riding the coattails of a national campaign.

There are some who argue that the essential political task is breaking with the Democrats if we want real change. But you only need to "break" with those you've joined with. Voting for a Democrat doesn't mean you've joined them. This is the "endorse" versus "vote for" distinction I made earlier. We also need to break with the wage system. Hopefully, when the left is far stronger than it is currently, working people will take over workplaces and establish an alternative to the wage system. But we don't suggest that people *today* refuse to accept wages. They shouldn't *endorse* the wage system; they should expose its inequities, and work tirelessly to undermine it. But while waiting for the revolution, people shouldn't be asked to forego their wages. Likewise, let us denounce the Democrats and the limits of their liberal policies (not to mention their conservative policies), but there's no reason to forego in the meantime whatever small reductions in suffering might result from voting for the Democrats.

The Democratic Party, it is argued, is the key ideological lynchpin of capitalism, keeping people — our potential allies in the labor movement, the civil rights movement, the feminist movement — from becoming socialists. But I think this argument confuses cause and effect. When there's a problem people naturally seek the simplest solution, the one that requires the least radical steps, the least disruption to their lives. If there were no Democratic Party people who were dissatisfied with the status quo wouldn't become radicals — they would invent a new liberal party. People will move beyond liberal solutions only when they see them as inadequate. But it is difficult to expose liberal solutions as inadequate when liberals are not in office to try their solutions.

So I'm glad when people move from being staunch supporters of the status quo to becoming advocates of liberal reform — in part because of the marginal benefits of liberal policies and in part because it shows that people are moving in a progressive direction. I believe that when these people try liberal reform, they'll find it lacking, and be open to radical ideas. But some radicals seem to welcome people shifting from the Democrats to the Republicans. Some, for example, cheered the defeat of Democrat Grey Davis in California's recall election because his defeat showed that people were fed up with the Democrats. Yes, they were fed up . . . and they voted for Schwarzenegger, who

is worse than Davis. I don't see this as a gain for the left or a demonstration of people's greater political sophistication or an indication that real change is now closer.

When the left *goes into* the Democratic Party, there is indeed a great danger of having to subordinate our message and our politics to those of the corporate-dominated party. But *voting for* is not the same as *going into* the Democratic Party. *Voting for* does not limit our freedom of action or our ability to tell the truth.

It is true that historically many radicals and militants have been bought off by the Democratic Party. Jesse Jackson, for example, gave up on building a genuine alternative in return for a place at the Democratic Party table. Any serious progressive movement has got to give this danger considerable thought. But the Democratic Party is hardly the only danger here and no one has provided a good argument as to why *voting for* a Democrat causes the same dangers as does becoming one of their spokespeople. And while it may be true that paid leaders of various environmental, labor, and reproductive rights organizations have a vested interest in supporting Democrats, I think it is perverse to think that rank and file members of these organizations would have no reason to prefer a Democratic administration to a Republican one but for the propagandizing of their bought-off leaders.

How can we prevent the rightward drift (if not gallop) of the Democrats?

Often, the importance of preventing the Democrats from moving rightward is a necessary and sufficient reason to run a candidate to their left, even one that can't win and even one whose candidacy may occasionally harm the Democrat's chances. (If there's no risk of harming the Democrat's chances, then there's no reason for the Democrat to stop moving right.) But for such a strategy to work, it is necessary that leftists sometimes refrain from running a candidate and sometimes vote for the Democrat — when the Democrat maintains decent (though of course still deficient) positions. (If leftists will always contest the Democrat and never vote for a Democrat, then there's nothing keeping the Democrat from moving to the right. That is, if the Democrat can never reap leftish votes, then why not try to pick up votes to the right.) So in any particular election, one needs to take account of how horrendous the Democrat is and how horrendous the Republican is.

My own sense is that in the 2004 election, given the unique dangers of the Bush administration, we should be less willing to risk handing a victory to the Republicans. So my advice would be that we should continue making our critique — of both Democrats and Republicans — so that radical ideas stay alive, continue our organizing and grassroots work, our building of alternative institutions — these will be necessary no matter who is president — but on election day itself we should vote for a third party in a safe state and Kerry in a swing state. But . . .

Even in this election (where I believe Bush is a serious danger), in contested states I would not urge an *automatic* vote for Kerry. I would *recommend* a vote for Kerry in contested states — unless he was so appalling that one simply couldn't bring oneself to do it. For some, Kerry's support for the Iraq war, the Iraq occupation, Ariel Sharon, and corporate tax breaks already makes it impossible to vote for Kerry. For others — and I count myself in this group — these Kerry positions are truly horrendous, but Bush is so dangerous that I'd probably still pull the lever for Kerry. But this group's (and my) tolerance for abomination is not unlimited. If Kerry continues moving right — as seems entirely possible^[14] — he will fail my puke test (that is, can I vote for him without puking?). And the fact that Kerry's campaign staff must know that there are many who will apply this puke test (whether they do so consciously or not and whether they call it this or not) may place some small brake on Kerry's rightward trend.

This is admittedly not a major brake. And as long as the left is weak, no approach will have much of a braking effect. But consider some other suggested strategies.

Instant run-off voting (IRV) is a voting procedure that allows voters to list their choices in order of preference. If no candidate receives a majority of the vote, then the votes of the candidate with the fewest votes are reallocated to those voters' second choices. And so on until some candidate achieves a majority. The advantage of this procedure is that it allows voters to vote their consciences

without throwing away their vote (and helping a Bush to win). This is a reform every democracy ought to institute and we should support it. But notice what happens if we *automatically* list our first choice first and the lesser evil somewhere lower down on the ballot. Then, because the Democrats don't have to worry about the left hurting their candidates, they can continue to ignore the left and move right. IRV works best if it is combined with the puke test. That is, under IRV voters should list the Democrat — unless they simply can't stomach it, which may have the effect of discouraging a rightward move by the Democrats.

Bruce Ackerman has suggested that Nader try to get the same slate of Electoral College electors assigned to him as to Kerry.[15] This, says Ackerman, will allow voters to vote for whom they want but without hurting the Democrat. But even if such a scheme were deemed legal, it would have a serious drawback. It would commit all Nader supporters to vote for Kerry from early in the campaign, with no option of changing their mind if Kerry later fails the puke test. The same drawback applies to the strategy of the New Party. By endorsing Democrats on their own line, they lose whatever leverage progressive votes might have had in keeping the Democrats from moving right.

If we do vote for a third party candidate in safe states, as I recommend, which candidate should it be? By the time this article appears, the Green Party will have chosen its candidate. I hope this candidate is not Ralph Nader and there are several reasons to be hesitant about voting for Nader as an independent candidate.

First, Nader's presidential run is an individual effort, not an attempt to build a party that can represent left ideas. He may resent *The Nation* and others for urging him not to run, but to whom is he responsible? Which left constituencies selected him or advised him to run? If we're trying to build a left that prizes above all else its commitment to democracy, is it helpful to support a candidate whose campaign is not connected to the left in any organic way? In 2000, Nader refused to join the Green Party and failed to freely share his contributors' list with the party. This doesn't suggest that the way to build the left is to support Nader, as a Green or not.

A second problem with Nader is that there are signs of some of the same weaknesses that people noted last time around regarding his commitment to various important issues. If one goes to Nader's website and looks under issues,[16] one finds no mention of affirmative action. Until the national women's march of April 25 — more than two months after he announced his candidacy — there was no mention of women's rights. A strong plank on women's rights has now been included, but there's something odd about how he endorses NOW's program verbatim, but can't seem to use his own words to back reproductive rights. One suspects this is not going to be a significant part of his campaign. If one important reason we support candidates who can't win is for the educational value of their campaigns, then what message does a Nader vote send — particularly to African Americans and feminists annoyed by our support for Nader in the face of Bush's assault on their rights? Nader writes that "The Democrats need to be shown in the field how to appeal to the millions of voters whom they have turned their back on because many of them are against abortion and gun control." Is his method of appealing to these voters to soft-pedal the abortion issue? Now to be sure, politics is the art of compromise, but if we're voting for Nader for educational reasons, shouldn't we want a clearer message?

Third, Nader's rather dubious claim that his candidacy will draw more votes from Bush than from Kerry — that's not what polls are showing — has led him to form ties to some rather unsavory rightwing figures.[17] Is this the message we want to send? Is his soft-pedaling on abortion and affirmative action a way to appeal to rightwing voters? Interestingly, though Nader rejects the strategy put forward by many Greens of campaigning strategically — not contesting Kerry in swing states — he is not above recommending strategic voting to rightwing voters. Here's what he says in his letter to "conservatives upset with the policies of the Bush administration":

What to do? It depends on your depth of disappointment with the national Republican Party. In the

numerous states that are going easily for President Bush, you can vote for the Ralph Nader independent candidacy for the presidency. This will send them a message that you will no longer be taken for granted. If you are beside yourself with a sense of the deep betrayal of conservative philosophy by the national Republican Party in Washington, D.C., you may wish to vote for the Nader ticket regardless of the state in which you reside. I have been for a long time noting the overlapping agreement between more and more conservatives and liberals on the above noted issues facing America. Sure they disagree on other matters, but the specific areas of agreement are very substantial, pretty fundamental and deserving of some individual voter messaging in the upcoming elections.[18]

In mid-May, Nader sought and received the endorsement of the Reform Party. "This endorsement shows that our independent campaign is receiving support from across the political spectrum from people upset with President Bush, and looking to shift the power back to the people so a solution revolution can take hold and solve many of the nagging problems and injustices in our society," declared Nader.[19] The Reform Party, which endorsed Pat Buchanan in 2000, has decent planks on Iraq, the Patriot Act, and trade, but wants to temporarily freeze immigration, convert social security into a system of private accounts, enact greater private property rights, establish a health care system based on free enterprise, and privatize the Tennessee Valley Authority; it rejects any treaty that compromises U.S. sovereignty.[20]

Fourth, Nader's arguments justifying his candidacy strike me as disingenuous and not worthy of a serious left. His campaign, he declares, is going to help bring out Democratic voters for Congressional contests. But it's not clear why he should want to do this unless he supports the notion of lesser evilism. He seems to want things both ways. His candidacy, he says, offers a one-two punch that can help defeat Bush. Come on! Nader continues to reject a campaign strategy that calls for avoiding vigorous campaigning in swing states. My guess is that this is a mistake on every level — even in terms of maximizing his votes, it may well cost him more votes from those progressives in safe states who might have cast ballots for him, but resent his refusal to acknowledge the dangers his swing-state campaign poses.

The case for backing David Cobb, should he become the Green Party candidate, seems to me much more compelling than for backing Nader. Cobb is really part of the Green Party, which is a real organization, going through a democratic process — not very efficiently, to be sure, but democratic nonetheless. Look at the Green Party website, www.gp.org/, and see such links as United for Peace and Justice, ZNet, Democracy Now, and Fair Trade Coffee. This is *our* party. Cobb favors a safe-states strategy for building the left while not giving undo aid to Bush. Like Nader, he opposes the Iraq war and corporate power. But he also strongly endorses affirmative action, reproductive rights, and gay and lesbian rights.[21] I plan to vote Green and, I hope, for Cobb (in the what-better-be-safe state of New Jersey). But in a swing state, I would vote for Kerry, with my puke test caveat.

Winning people to our politics is no easy task. Socialism is a complex idea, breaking through the media's disinformation is difficult. But anyone who can understand our basic ideas can certainly understand as well that you can work for radical change while also sometimes reducing people's suffering by voting for a lesser evil.

Footnotes

1. I leave aside the dubiousness of the claim that the Republicans are more up front about their agenda. Outside their \$1,000-a-plate fundraisers they tend not to emphasize their aim of redistributing income to the rich.

2. H J RES 114 , YEA-AND-NAY, 10-OCT-2002, 3:05 PM; QUESTION: On Passage; BILL TITLE: To Authorize the Use of United States Armed Forces Against Iraq

	YEAS	NAYS	NV
REPUBLICAN	215	6	2
DEMOCRATIC	81	126	1
INDEPENDENT		1	
TOTALS	296	133	3

3. See [here](#).

4. H R 1836, 26-MAY-2001, 10:11 AM; QUESTION: On Agreeing to the Conference Report; BILL TITLE: Economic Growth and Tax Relief Reconciliation Act

	YEAS	NAYS	NV
REPUBLICAN	211		10
DEMOCRATIC	28	153	29
INDEPENDENT	1	1	
TOTALS	240	154	39

5. "No Democrat is going to beat Bushism," An interview with Green Party activist Howie Hawkins by Derek Seidman, ZNet.

6. Gabriel Kolko, "The Coming Elections and the Future of American Global Power," *CounterPunch*, March 12 / 14, 2004.

7. Alexander Cockburn, "Bush, Kerry, and Empire," *CounterPunch*, April 16/18, 2004.

8. See [here](#).

9. See [here](#).

10. Tom Engelhardt's delightful term. See his weblog, TomDispatch.com.

11. I'm not saying that those who don't have a radical perspective — say a liberal labor union — shouldn't provide funds to Kerry. But for radicals — who are likely to be the only source of funds for radical projects — to donate their money (or time) to Kerry is to give up any hope for the left.

12. U.S. House of Representatives, Ways and Means Committee, *1998 Green Book: Background Material and Data on Programs Within the Jurisdiction of the Committee on Ways and Means*, Committee Print WMCP 105-7, 19 May 1998, 414 (table 7-7), available [here](#) and in PDF format.

13. U.S. Bureau of the Census, *Statistical Abstract of the United States, 2000*, Washington, DC: 2000, 439 (table 699).

14. See, for example, Jim VandeHei, "Despite Rhetoric, Bush, Kerry Agree On Many Issues," *Washington Post*, May 9, 2004, A1; James Rainey, "Kerry Outlines Centrist Strategy in a 'Contract' With Middle Class," *Los Angeles Times*, April 24, 2004, A19.

15. Bruce Ackerman, "2-for-1 Voting," *New York Times*, May 5, 2004, A27.

16. See here.

17. See Ted Glick, "Eights Questions for Ralph Nader," Feb. 24, 2004; Doug Ireland, "Ralph's Dark Side: Mr. Nader and the Newmanites," Feb. 27, 2004; and Christopher Hitchens, "Unsafe on any ballot," *Vanity Fair*, May 2004. For concerns regarding Nader's refusal to clearly distance himself from right-wing economic nationalists in the 2000 campaign, see the letters from Chip Berlet and Howie Hawkins in *New Politics*, no. 30, Winter 2001, 190-92.

18. See here.

19. Nick Anderson, "Reform Party Endorsement of Nader Could Land Him on Key State Ballots," *Los Angeles Times*, May 13, 2004, A21. Though Nader sought the endorsement, he has not yet indicated whether he will run on the Reform Party line. Kevin Zeese, a Nader spokesperson, said "We'll decide state by state. It depends on the local politics of the state and whether in some states we prefer the independent party line." Katharine Q. Seelye, "Reform Party Backs Nader, Offering Line On Ballots," *New York Times*, May 13, 2004, A22.

20. See Reform Party Platform and Reform Party Platform Amendments. The latter page refers to changes in green that are not in fact visible.

21. See www.votecobb.org/, and, on equal rights for all, www.votecobb.org/ej4all.html.