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Evaluating the Citizens Party Experience

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This short "position paper" was written to prepare and focus the discussion the workshop titled "Evaluating the Citizens Party Experience." This paper reflects the position of its authors, and is intended to initiate, not culminate, discussion. People who would like to participate in a workshop panel to respond to this paper are urged to do so. To help organize the workshop, we ask that you get in touch with us as soon as possible.

THE QUESTION that socialists in the Citizens Party need to evaluate is: Did the Citizens Party advance the cause of independent political action? In the wake of the Party's poor showing in the election and the organizational collapse after November, some question the accomplishments of the Party.

We believe that the Citizens Party did advance the cause of independent political action, modestly. We also believe it was correct for socialists to enter the Party, and a failing of the left that so few organized groups participated.

To make our case, we will first review the reasons why the IS entered the Citizens Party, then examine the Party's internal problems and the political environment it had to function in. From there, we will report on the state of the Party since the elections, and finally draw a balance sheet. [For background, see Mark's article in the February, 1981 Changes.]

THE DECISION of the IS to get involved in the Citizens Party was based on the following reasons:

1. Commitment to independent political action. Despite the fact that the Citizens Party was neither socialist nor based in the working class, it represented a clear political break from Democratic Party liberalism. It had the potential to give a radical electoral expression to those disenchanted with the two-party system.

For the IS the questions were the following: What would be the politics of the party? Would it be able to attract broader forces? Could it attract significant minority, labor and other political movements? Would it advance the political development of future third party efforts?

Judging the potential for the Citizens Party in these terms yielded a fairly positive assessment. The Party was to be centered around a conception of economic democracy that was anti-corporate and smacked of American populism. Whatever happened in the course of the election, this was the first significant third party since the '60s. Furthermore, this was an opportunity to relate to an election in a positive way, rather than abstaining (the old "vote no" position). As such, it provided an opportunity to raise the issue of independent politics in broader circles.

2. An assessment of the 1980 election was that there would be little choice offered by the Democrats, creating an opening for the Citizens Party. Many Democrats were openly disgusted with Carter. While the Teddy Kennedy syndrome emerged and lasted through the Democratic Convention, Carter's clear lead did create an opening for the Citizens Party.

3. Regroupment perspective. The IS hoped that the Citizens Party would attract other serious leftists who agreed on the importance of creating a new political party. Through working together in the Citizens Party, we hoped to create a pole within the Party that might help to lay the groundwork for future initiatives to labor, and we hoped that the experience of working together could convince others of the need for a regrouped socialist organization that understood the importance of independent political action.

4. Viability of the candidate: Barry Commoner represented a candidate that was as good as possible in 1980. While not a mass leader, Commoner represented innovative thinking in energy and was a strong opponent of nuclear power — two of the most important issues at the time.

INTERNAL PROBLEMS OF THE CAMPAIGN

1. The Party never healed the split that occurred at the convention over the national campaign versus grass roots organizing. Despite the official vote and victory of the Commoner forces, there was not unanimity in the Party. If anything, there was a fair amount of mistrust that made it difficult to cohere a national campaign.

2. Lack of leadership. The party did not develop an executive committee that took political leadership. Key decisions were left to the professional political staff hired to run the campaign.

3. Money. The Party was plagued from the beginning by poor economic management. The first few

months of ballot access work ran the Party into debt. The campaign was constantly sacrificed to fund-raising. And as Reagan gained strength, the liberal money began to dry up.

4. Lack of definition to the campaign. The campaign had no particular identity. One week it would concentrate on Iran and the next week, something else. After it was all over, the only thing most people remembered was "bullshit."

5. Improperly designed strategy. The original conception of gaining 5% of the vote was unrealistic. Yet there never was a realistic assessment of what was possible. There was no emphasis on building ongoing Party organizations.

6. Lack of experienced people. The lack of leadership on the top and inexperienced people on the bottom created a difficult situation. Local groups did not know how to build a campaign.

EXTERNAL FACTORS

The IS hoped that the Citizens Party would emerge in the context of a dull campaign between a conservative Democrat and a conservative Republican. The campaign was dull, but more complicated. First, Kennedy challenged Carter's re-nomination as the liberal alternative. Second, John Anderson ran as an independent. Those candidates filled the vacuum that we hoped the Citizens Party would occupy.

As election time neared the Citizens Party was faced with the bane of all third party efforts — the psychology of lesser evilism. Carter ran on the basis that as unsuccessful as he had been Reagan was outright dangerous. That argument did not return Carter to the White House, but it did scare many potential Commoner voters into the Carter camp. At the NAM Convention that summer, for example, several speakers explained that they were voting for Carter to keep Phyllis Schlafly out of the White House, etc.

AFTER NOVEMBER

The real test of whether the Citizens Party could survive its first troubled year came after the election. Many of the initiators abandoned the Party like a sinking ship. The first layer of leadership was exhausted and wanted out. The Party was left with a debt of \$140,000.

Despite this, there were efforts to hold the Party together over the winter until a new leadership could step in. IS members pushed for a leadership that represented the healthiest local Party organizations and that saw the Party in a realistic way, more as an organizing committee than an accomplished fact.

There were some who believed the Citizens Party was already a viable party capable of doing what a large party does. The prevailing view was somewhere in between, but the National Committee passed the "holding action" view. The Party still limps along, winning some election victories in a few small cities like Burlington, with 49 races planned for fall. Money is being raised, and a weak executive committee functions in a caretaker manner.

THE SCORECARD

Despite this rather grim assessment, the Citizens Party had some real accomplishments:

1. Creation of a network. A network of people committed to independent political action now exists throughout many states. While the majority tend to be counter-culture enthusiasts, there are many who are serious about building a viable third party with an orientation to working and oppressed people. It was the Citizens Party campaign that created this network. Should there be increased sentiment for independent political action, this network will be a valuable asset.

2. Increased and developed political understanding. Before the Citizens Party, many people who support independent political action, including the IS, had little knowledge of electoral politics. Through the Citizens Party, there is a group of people across the country who know something about election laws, ballot access, building campaigns, electoral coalitions, and approaching the progressive community.

Beyond this, the campaign was an education in how to take some of the elements of a socialist program (like nationalization, national planning) and argue for them to a non-socialist audience.

3. Did the Citizens Party popularize the idea of independent political action? This is the most important and difficult question to answer. It would be fair to say that the Party's impact was small, but positive. The activity of the Detroit Party in the unions is one example. The Commoner candidacy gave those unionists who are for a labor party a positive way of arguing the bankruptcy of labor's reliance on the Democrats because Commoner was saying the things that labor-backed candidates should have said.

With the knowledge of hindsight, we would argue for doing it all over again. The Citizens Party did not live up to our most optimistic expectations. It may not endure as a viable organization. But the Citizens Party was a valuable lesson for both its activists and its audience.