

Is the Time Ripe For Third-Party and Independent Bids?

By Stuart Rothenberg, Roll Call Contributing Writer

Both the Republican and Democratic brands are damaged. Voters think the country is headed off on the wrong track and still clamor for change. Every primary and general election hopeful who can (and some who reasonably can't) is running against Washington, D.C., and against professional politicians.

So is this the time for third-party candidates and Independents to show their political muscle and become serious players in the fall campaigns and in November?

In a few places the answer is "yes." In most, it's still a thundering "no."

There are really three types of Independent hopefuls: contenders, spoilers and pretenders.

Independent candidates for governor in at least three states, all of them in New England, are running serious races, and the number of credible non-major-party candidates could grow if Minnesota's Independence Party nominates someone with serious credentials or personal resources.

Former Rhode Island Sen. Lincoln Chafee, now an Independent, may well have the best shot of the New England bunch of winning his state's top office in November, thereby replacing retiring Gov. Don Carcieri (R), who is finishing his second term.

Chafee bears a well-known political name. His father, John, served four terms in the U.S. Senate, and he served one. Both men ran as Republicans. And like his father, Lincoln Chafee was a liberal Republican whose record angered conservatives both in Rhode Island and nationally.

The likely GOP nominee for governor is former gubernatorial aide John Robitaille, whose electoral high-water mark is losing a state legislative contest by four votes. Two Democratic statewide officeholders are competing for their party's nomination, state Treasurer Frank Caprio and state Attorney General Patrick Lynch.

Chafee currently leads in public polls in three-way ballot tests, and his appeal across the partisan spectrum makes him a contender.

In Maine, Independent Eliot Cutler looks like a very credible candidate in a

contest that now, some two months before the state's primary, boasts a field of candidates that is almost large enough to deserve its own ZIP code. The winner will replace retiring Gov. John Baldacci (D), who won re-election four years ago with 38 percent of the vote.

A native of Maine who served on the staff of former Sen. Edmund Muskie (D) and then in President Jimmy Carter's Office of Management and Budget, Cutler was a partner in the Washington, D.C., powerhouse law firm of Akin Gump Strass Hauer and Feld.

Cutler rightly points out that Maine has not been reluctant to elect Independent governors — in 1974 James Longley won the state's top job as an Independent, and Angus King won two terms the same way, in 1994 and 1998. The last major party nominee to win at least 50 percent of the vote in a Maine gubernatorial contest was Joseph Brennan in 1982.

While incumbents in Maine and Rhode Island are term-limited and unable to seek re-election, Massachusetts incumbent Gov. Deval Patrick (D) is running for a second term despite having a job-approval rating in public polls of under 40 percent.

Two Republican businessmen, Charlie Baker and Christy Mihos, are competing for the GOP nomination, while Patrick has avoided a primary. But in the fall, an Independent, state Treasurer Tim Cahill, will be a factor.

Cahill, initially elected in 2002 and re-elected four years later, ran and served as a Democrat until last year, when he switched his party affiliation to Independent. A critic of the Obama health care plan and an opponent of tax hikes, he has the kind of appeal that could hurt the GOP's chances in November (which explains why Republicans are attacking him). Polls generally show Cahill running a strong third, getting about one-fifth of the vote.

The Independence Party nominee in Minnesota has not yet selected a nominee. The front-runner for the nomination appears to be Tom Horner, a former newspaper reporter and editor who worked as press secretary and chief of staff for former Sen. David Durenberger (R).

But elsewhere, third-party nominees may prove to be less important than current speculation suggests, and even less important than in 2008.

A recently much-ballyhooed Quinnipiac University poll that was cited by some in the media as having potentially "bad news" for the GOP because it showed Republicans leading Democrats by 5 points in a head-to-head generic ballot test but losing to Democrats by 11 points in a three-way ballot test that includes a tea party representative is pretty much without value.

Polls are useful only when they reflect reality, and tea party candidates running as Independents or third-party nominees aren't likely to have the resources or

credibility to draw in the double digits when the fall rolls around. Most tea party types are mere pretenders.

Elsewhere, a third-party candidate probably cost former state Sen. Steve Stivers (R) a congressional seat in Ohio in 2008, but given the change in national mood, that's not likely to be the case again this year when Stivers once again runs against Rep. Mary Jo Kilroy (D) in the state's 15th district.

Certainly some races will turn out to be so close that an Independent could turn out to be a spoiler. But right now, that's almost impossible to predict.

Interestingly, two of the three New England Independents are current or former officeholders, while the other, Cutler, has been in and around Washington for years. That puts to rest the idea that most Independent candidates are true outsiders.

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