

OPINION

Why Democrats should thank Nader

By Robert C. Fellmeth

The conventional wisdom among pundits is that Green Party candidate Ralph Nader cost Al Gore Florida and hence a clear electoral victory. Democrats seeking distraction from their candidate's dismal debate performance similarly opine.

The first group focuses on irrelevant numbers, the second is misled by scapegoat fever.

The logic seems straightforward: a 5 percent nationwide vote for Nader translates into a 1 percent difference for Gore because, with Nader out of the equation, his votes would go roughly 2 percent to Gore, 1 percent to Bush, and 2 percent would not have voted without Nader on the ballot.

But what about Florida, both groups ask? Only several hundred votes apart, and even one-tenth of 1 percent would have given the election clearly to Gore?

Not so. Both groups forget the larger reality: without Nader, this election would not have been close, Gore would have 5 million to 10 million fewer votes and would have lost Florida by several hundred thousand votes, not by several hundred.

Look at the real numbers. American presidential elections are about positioning to capture the independent voter, the middle of the electorate. How have the Republicans consistently defeated recent Democratic nominees? By painting them as ultra-left nuts.

Hubert Humphrey was a bleeding heart who catered to labor and the "special interests." Walter Mondale was a "tax and spender" who would

run us into the ground. Michael Dukakis was a soft-on-crime wimp.

And Gore was just as ripe for the plucking. The Republicans were poised to attack him with his environmental statements, solicitude for governmental solutions and support from the usual suspects — from the Republican perspective.

Having Reform Party candidate Pat Buchanan in the race favored Bush and made that approach more feasible. Buchanan placed Bush in the middle, the moderate "compassionate conservative," a pro-Hispanic humanist, a conservative with a heart.

Contrast him against the hardline Buchanan, a tribalist talking about the absolute right to life and the dangerous outsiders. How much easier for the Republicans to put Bush in the middle of the road and Gore to the dangerous left.

Enter Nader, excoriating Gore as too much like Bush, as a tool of the corporatists, backed by the same special-interest money as Bush. Twopeas in a pod. The Nader campaign hit 50 states and carried this message with some strength.

How would Bush paint Gore as a left-wing extremist with Nader to Gore's left excoriating both as right-wing nuts in kind? Not easily. We did not see any Willie Hortons, did we? Instead, Republicans were left with essentially the same mantra as the Democrats: We serve the elderly because you guys give money and vote. We even talk about the middle class. Only Nader really talks about children.

Bush argued that he was the education candidate, but that we should not "throw money at the problem" (i.e. invest in our children). Rather, accountability was the key, but of course, he was for local control without federal strings. So why wasn't he running for governor again? Consistency, howev-

er, is irrelevant when candidates are "positioning" amongst polls and focus groups.

That positioning with Nader greatly inhibited left-wing baiting. Bush would have spent more on defense than Gore, but both would keep our troops in Europe, among our wealthy allies. Only Nader was talking reduction.

Bush was left with weak positioning, unable to shove Gore off the center. The candidates were carved in the public mind as a choice is between two children of privilege: the competent stiff guy and the average but likable frat bro.

Without Nader, Gore would have been pushed to the end of the spectrum much more easily and would have conservatively (as it were) lost five times as many independent votes.

Take even the extreme case of Florida. With Nader out of the race, about 50,000 of the 90,000 Nader voters would have voted for Gore or Bush, dividing 35,000 Gore and 15,000 to Bush, giving Gore a net gain of 20,000.

But how much would Gore have lost from his large independent vote among the elderly of Florida if painted more successfully as a left winger? Out of nearly 6 million voters? A lot more than 20,000, a lot more than 100,000.

Look at the numbers; look at the results in elections where the far left candidate a Democrat. When Nader reaches above 15 percent, as could happen if he runs in 2004, his effect will become an issue. But not at 3 percent given the countervailing effect of spectrum positioning.

In fact, if Democrats can be sure he will poll below 10 percent, they should pay Nader to run. They are not smart enough to do that, but many are so distracted that they blame their possible loss on the man who in fact made victory possible.