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Nader decision stirs passion among disaffected voters

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By DANIEL STURM

Paul Emery says that he now knows where his vote will go: to Ralph Nader.

"He's smart, and he's capable of putting together a team that could run the country," said Emery, who helped in the 2000 petition drive to place Ralph Nader on the ballot in Michigan.

Nader, a 69-year-old consumer advocate, was the Green Party candidate four years ago. With his name appearing on the ballot in 43 states and Washington, Nader garnered 2.7 percent of the vote. Nader said Sunday he will run as an independent this time. He said the Green Party national convention will not be held until June, which he believes would leave too little time to launch a presidential campaign.

To put him on the ballot in Michigan, Nader supporters must collect 30,000 signatures, including 100 from each of half of the state's 15 congressional districts. The filing deadline is July 15.

Nader said he contemplated retirement but decided against it, bemoaning that there was too great of a democracy gap in America. Appearing on NBC's "Meet The Press," he said, "This country has more problems and injustices than it deserves," elaborating that he would go into the race in order to challenge the two-party "duopoly."

"Washington is now corporate-occupied territory," he declared. "There is now a for-sale sign on most agencies and departments. Money is flowing in like never before. It means that corporations are saying no to the necessities of the American people. Basically, it's a question of both parties flunking."

Emery, who owns Oakgrove Computer Group in Lansing, said he agrees with Nader's assessment that the Democratic and Republican parties have been similar since 1945. "In a longer view than four years, the foreign policy of this country was atrocious under both Democratic and Republican administrations," he said. "It's not that there aren't any good people in either party, but the reason it's been unchanging is that both parties are totally controlled by money."

Four years ago Democrats accused Nader's candidacy of costing Al Gore the election against George W. Bush. These critics are now concerned that the 2004 race will be a replay of the last election. Terry McAuliffe, chairman of the Democratic National Committee, revealed last week that he had met with Nader several times, urging him not to run.

Mark Brewer, chairman of the Michigan Democratic Party, issued a statement Monday. "We are very disappointed at Ralph Nader's decision to run for president," he said, "However, we will continue to pursue the voters who are likely to vote for him in the general election."

Al From, chairman of the Democratic Leadership Council, doesn't agree with this popular assessment of the last

election. Bush would have beaten Gore by 1 percentage point even if Nader hadn't run, he argues. "The assertion that Nader's marginal vote hurt Gore is not borne out by polling data," the rank-and-file Democrat wrote in a report for Blueprint Magazine. "When exit pollers asked voters how they would have voted in a two-way race, Bush actually won by a point. That was better than he did with Nader in the race." Nader collected nearly 3 million votes in 2000, which is more than 10 times the margin separating the two main candidates.

When asked if they believed Nader might cost the Democrats their win in the upcoming presidential election, Lansing area residents who voted for Nader in 2000 seemed not to think so.

Ray Ziarno, the Green Party candidate for secretary of state in 2002, said: "Nader did not spoil the election. More Democrats voted for Bush than for Nader. Seven minor political parties in Florida had more votes than the Bush-Gore difference. Finally, Gore did win the election. But the Supreme Court decided to put Bush into power."

The retired engineering consultant said he was inclined to vote for Nader again but would wait to make his final decision once the Democratic candidate was nominated. Ziarno said Democratic front-runner John Kerry was a rather typical Democrat who shifts his political positions frequently and depends too much on corporate funding.

"Nader hasn't changed his issue orientation one bit," Ziarno said. "What he's been saying for years, he says even more strongly. The biggest problem in our political system is the duopoly of the two major parties, and there's almost total exclusion of the minor parties by media, the pundits, and the corporate interest groups. It's worse now than it was in 2000."

Bonnie Bucqueroux, the Green Party candidate for the U.S. House of Representatives in 2000 in the district that includes Lansing, also said she doesn't believe Nader's candidacy will cost the Democrats the presidential race. "Frankly, I don't think Nader will get enough votes to matter. Without a party structure he can't get on the ballot."

The Internet analyst said she voted for Nader in 2000 because he was building an alternative to the Democratic Party. "I think the issues Nader is raising are critical and need to be more widely understood. And I think that there is not much difference between the Democrats and the Republicans."

Despite her appreciation for Nader, Bucqueroux doesn't intend to vote for him this year because he is no longer affiliated with the Green Party. "I'm baffled why he thinks running as an independent is a smart move, because he is not building the kind of movement that he said he was." She said she would probably end up voting for whoever the Democratic nominee is. The Rev. Al Sharpton has been her favorite candidate.

Bucqueroux, who calls herself a "disaffected Democrat," believes the Democratic Party has no one other than itself to blame for having lost the last presidential race. "They wasted far too much energy trying to destroy the Greens, rather than to beat the Republicans. Nader really wasn't a spoiler. What I believe the Republicans have done wisely is to energize their base. They've got a president who, instead of being a healer, has decided to be as divisive as possible. Let's hope that if we get a Democrat in there, he will have the balls to do the same."

Bucqueroux admits that the prospect of having to vote for Kerry has put her in a cynical mood. When asked whether Kerry could make a difference, she replied: "Very little. I think all he will do is give us some better Supreme Court nominees. If we're lucky we are going to elect a Dud Democrat instead of an absolutely awful Republican. It's a sad state."

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