

## Minorities say Nader lacks passion on racial issues

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## Are Greens too white bread?

By Matt Welch / NEWSFORCHANGE

09.22.00 | It may seem odd for a presidential candidate who favors reparations for slavery and regularly denounces the "discriminatory prison-industrial complex" to be on the defensive about race relations, but that's exactly where Green Party presidential candidate Ralph Nader has found himself this week.

After being accused by several business-oriented minority groups on Monday of being "oblivious" to race and gender issues and of campaigning in a "cloistered environment" of white males, Nader spoke out Thursday in uncharacteristically specific language against the "racial chasm" and the "discrimination [that] persists throughout American life."

In his statement, and in [meetings Wednesday with Wisconsin minority leaders](#), Nader sought to quell what has for him become a disturbing trend: groups on the left wing of the Democratic Party challenging his progressive credentials

This month alone, Liberal icon Rep. Barney Frank (D-Mass) has traveled to Wisconsin to convince Nader supporters that Gore is actually *better* on red-meat liberal issues; Robert Kennedy Jr. - whose father was one of the few politicians Nader has ever truly admired - has told anyone who will listen that a vote for the Green Party candidate would be a vote against the environment; National Organization of Women President [Patricia Ireland accused Nader](#) of being "willfully ignorant" of women's issues; and Monday's letter charges the candidate with failing to actively seek minority support.

"Mexican-American people, poor people, need him the most," Ben Benavidez, president emeritus of the Mexican American Political Association, told the San Francisco Chronicle. "In the [California] Central Valley, we never see him here."

Nader and his supporters have lashed back at the critics, accusing them of acting out of "political expediency," or suffering from "Frightened Liberal Syndrome."

"It just shows you how totally servile some of these constituency groups are toward the Democratic Party," Nader said last week in Las Vegas. "[They] have been given the back of the hand for eight years by the Democratic Party, but crawl to an endorsement in return for no policy agenda because 'They're not as bad as George Bush.'"

But behind the political skirmishing there are some very real differences in approach towards race between Nader and his critics on the Left. Where they see a Green Party and presidential campaign made up largely of middle-class whites, he sees "constituency group" critics hooked on "symbolism" instead of progress.

Where some of his critics see a candidate who, in the [words of writer Vanessa Daniel](#), "appears to be tiptoeing around an elephant when he fails to mention ... race and racism," Nader sees a more "systemic" class struggle against corporations, of which racial discrimination is an important but lesser component.

And when potential supporters all but plead for a warmer, more human personal touch, Nader stubbornly remains who he is: a solitary and frequently awkward man who brags that his campaign is "about ideas, not emotion."

### **Uses a different lens**

Perhaps the most accurate critique of Nader is that he rarely spotlights problems through the lens of race.

"Nader often speaks to problems that have their most devastating effects in communities of color," Daniel wrote. "However, he almost never points to the racial dimensions of these issues."

A reading of Nader's writing quickly bears this out. In 19 months worth of columns posted on [his Web site](#), he uses the words "African-American," "black," "Latino," "Hispanic," "minority" and "race" a total of nine times combined, over 69 columns. In [one press conference last week](#), by comparison, he used the words "corporate" or "corporation" at least 57 times.

Nader's overriding ideology -- shaped by a career which began with him exposing faulty General Motors designs and then being hounded by GM private investigators -- is that corporations, "will push the envelope to its limit of oppression if they're allowed to," as he told a Long Beach State class last week. Nader, comfortable in the role of pedant, often lectures his fellow travelers in *The Struggle* about how their narrow concerns are part of a broader pattern of corporate wrongdoing. Nader told a National Association for the Advancement of Colored People convention in July that all the major social movements in U.S. history had one common theme: "They took power away from people and institutions who had too much power, and made that power be shared by the many," he said.

"Who opposed the anti-slavery movement? Who opposed the women's right-to-vote movement? It wasn't just some men," Nader argued. "It was the railroads, it was the liquor industry, it was industrial interests that didn't want women to speak out with voting power against child labor and the injustices of the Industrial Revolution. And who opposed the workers in the steel, coal, textile and other areas trying to unionize? It was the corporations. And who opposed the farmers, dirt-poor farmers coming out of Texas? It was the big banks and the insurance companies. And I might say it's much the same today."

Indeed, one of Nader's bitterest criticisms of NOW and its president was that they have failed to appreciate the damning effects of "marketplace discrimination" against women -- which he has chronicled in two separate books. His strict capitalist critique sometimes puts him completely at odds

with the vast majority of historians. For example, in "Citizen Nader," a 1973 biography, author Charles McCarry recounts an incident when Nader vehemently denied the argument that Catholic-Protestant tension was behind the troubles in Northern Ireland. "No, no," he said. "It's a struggle for social equality, pure and simple."

### **Tone deaf?**

Nader's love of statistics, combined with his eschewal of pleasures such as novels and intimate friendship, has produced some amusing miscalculations over his storied and tireless career as a public advocate -- and made it difficult for him to build bridges beyond the wonk-activist community.

You will not see Ralph Nader sing in the choir and deliver Southern-drenched sermons at a Black Baptist church, *a la* Al Gore or Bill Clinton. He is fond of children and clearly in his element around college students, but is not exactly a touchy-feely type guy. On the Tonight Show With Jay Leno, for example, he was the only person on stage to avoid kissing singer Gloria Estefan. And his "traveling entourage," if you could call it that, consists of his nephew and one other young man.

His interactions with African-Americans on the campaign trail are telling. On Leno, he sat next to D.L. Hughley, a black comedian from South-Central L.A., and the next day he was still impressed with the encounter. "That D.L., he's the real deal!" he told supporters at a [Brentwood fundraiser](#).

At an Oakland press conference after a meeting with union members, an African American questioner asked Nader why there weren't more nonwhites represented in the discussion.

"It's very simple: Millions of low-paid workers are people of color, and they're not unionized," Nader said quickly, before reciting minimum wage statistics and historical dates of legislation.

At the University of Nevada-Las Vegas, a young black journalist/activist presented the Green Party candidate with a T-shirt. "Right on!" Nader cheered. Later, at a press conference, when the same man was asking his third or fourth long question -- monologues, really -- Nader cut him off with the loud stage voice he employs when telling a joke: "Hey! Equal opportunity for everyone!"

Such clumsy moments may be explained as simply nerdiness. But Nader has little leeway for such stumbling among minority intellectuals who believe the Green Party whose banner he is carrying -- and the "Seattle Coalition" of labor unionists and environmentalists he aches to lead -- are merely the protest wings of the white middle-class.

"Nader, although he is of Lebanese descent, personifies a brand of colorblindness that is endemic in the white American left," Daniel wrote.

Medea Benjamin, the Green Party candidate for U.S. Senate in California (and a white woman), says her biggest challenge is to "overcome the hostility" of various groups of color. "I'm really focusing on expanding our base," she said. "They feel that the Green Party is mostly white ... and they tell us 'You know, come back to us in a couple of years, when you've grown up.'"

But to say Nader is tone-deaf on civil rights issues is dead wrong. A shortlist of his heroes would include Martin Luther King, Jr., and former Supreme Court justice Thurgood Marshall (whose visit to Harvard Law School in 1958 was a formative event in young Ralph's life), and he rarely fails to tell college students how much they owe to the generations that proceeded them.

"Let me tell you, if it wasn't for the people in the '50s and '60s, and what they did with civil rights, half of you wouldn't be here," he told the Long Beach State class. "Right here, in this room. What they did for women's rights, for people of color, half of you wouldn't even be here. I went to school at Princeton University, 740 students, 750 students. No women, two African Americans, no Hispanics. ... Now, what are you gonna do for the next generation?"

In less-combative moments, Nader shows some empathy for African-Americans who support Gore in hopes of defeating Bush, but even then his outrage at how Democrats treat blacks is palpable.

"They're just terrified of the Republicans ... and they have some justification for that," he said at a [Brentwood fundraiser](#), where there was exactly one African-American among 30 guests. "On the other hand the Democrats give them far more rhetoric than reality. But I mean, for the Democrats to do what they did on so-called welfare reform, beat up on a three-hundred-dollar-a-month welfare mom, and not do anything about corporate welfare, which is far greater in dollars ... is *unconscionable*."

And, by almost any measure of progressive politics, Nader's agenda is the most far-reaching blueprint for federally mandated "racial justice" that has ever been seen on the national level. He wants to end the (racist) drug war, abolish the (racist) death penalty, outlaw racial profiling and racial redlining, double the minimum wage, abolish poverty, provide universal health coverage, increase community policing, establish community-based credit unions, prosecute payday loan-sharks, strengthen Affirmative Action, punish companies who profited from slavery two centuries ago, and so on and on and on. And, in case anyone hasn't noticed, his running mate is a Native American woman.

"We have got to be determined that we are not going to be flim-flammed, we are not going to be sweet-talked, we are not going to be regaled with rhetoric, that we are only interested in justice as a result, not justice as a broken promise," he told the NAACP.

"If you ever wondered why the right wing and the corporate wing of the Democratic Party has so much more power over that party than the progressive wing, it's because the right wing and the corporate wing have somewhere to go: It's called the Republican Party," Nader said. "But if you look at the progressive wing, if you look at working families, if you look at trade unions, look at groups trying to advance civil rights and consumer rights and environmental rights, they have nowhere to go. And you know when you're told that you have nowhere to go, you get taken for granted.

"And when you get taken for granted, you get taken."

