

VICE SQUAD: DREYFUSS ON THE MAD WORLD OF DICK CHENEY

THE AMERICAN **Prospect**

LIBERAL INTELLIGENCE

MAY 2006

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First Among Thirds

Since 1998, New York's Working Families Party has been that rare thing: a third party that doesn't run spoilers and has real-world impact. Now, the party is testing the waters beyond the Empire State.

BY GREG SARGENT

ONE MORNING IN 1989, DAN CANTOR WAS HONEYMOONING in Scotland when his new wife, Laura Markham, looked up from a newspaper article about electoral returns in a European Parliament election. The virtues of European political systems isn't typical pillow talk between newlyweds, but Cantor and Markham were political junkies. She'd been struck by the success that minor parties were having. And she had an idea.

"Why don't you do something useful and start a third party in America?" she asked him.

"You can't do it," he said. "We don't have proportional representation."

As Cantor recalls it, Markham rejoined: "You're a wimp."

He wasn't, as it turned out. Seventeen years later, Cantor's Working Families Party (WFP), based in New York, has become that rare thing in American politics: a progressive success story. It has built itself into a powerhouse on its home turf, and, though you've probably never heard of it if you live outside the state, you may be hearing more about it soon, because it's now on the cusp

of going national—and in time may even prove to have an impact on national politics.

Cantor, along with an old friend, union political director Bob Master, and many other colleagues, created the WFP by exploiting the fact that New York is one of a handful of states that allows "fusion" voting—that is, candidates can run on more than one ballot line, and voters can vote for a candidate under more than one party label. Skeptics, take note: The WFP has nothing in common with Green-style third-party politics, which seeks to pull Democrats leftward by running challengers who siphon away votes and are little more than protest candidates. The WFP also seeks to pull Democrats leftward, but it has no interest in merely putting up protest candidates—it does so by "cross-endorsing" Democratic candidates, giving them a second line to capture voters who might like them but might not want to pull the "D" lever: independent voters alienated from both parties, liberals disillusioned with the Democrats' centrist drift, or moderate Republicans who may like a candidate on issues but are loathe to vote Democratic. In New York, the WFP has been successful



PHOTOS COURTESY WFP

again and again in pulling extra votes that Democratic candidates might not have received, helping put them over the top in dozens of political races. Indeed, since its birth in 1998, the WFP has overcome much skepticism, steadily growing into a force whose vote pulling has soared, reaching 168,719 for Senator Chuck Schumer's re-election in 2004.

The WFP's focus on Democrats has enabled it to accumulate surprising influence over Democratic officials, yanking them left on economic issues like the minimum wage, which the party was instrumental in helping to raise in New York State, in exchange for its support. Indeed, at a time when Democrats nationally have muted their economically populist rhetoric, the WFP has unfurled a banner of unabashed economic populism. It has managed to get working people of all ideological stripes in New York to listen to its bread-and-butter platform of higher wages, expanded public investment in health care and education, and opposition to shipping jobs overseas.

	PARTY	PRESIDENT VICE PRESIDENT	U.S. SENATOR
A	REPUBLICAN	GEORGE BUSH DICK CHENEY	HOWARD MILLS
B	DEMOCRATIC	JOHN KERRY JOHN EDWARDS	CHARLES SCHUMER
C	INDEPENDENCE		
D	CONSERVATIVE		
E	WORKING FAMILIES	JOHN KERRY JOHN EDWARDS WFP	CHARLES SCHUMER WFP

Fusion, Not Confusion: Savvy New York progressives know to cast their votes in Row E.

In coming weeks, the WFP will begin launching its ambitious plan to channel resources to other states, where local organizers are already hard at work on various efforts to replicate the party's success. The party wants a new initiative on the ballot in Massachusetts for 2006 that would legalize fusion voting in that state. It hopes to do the same in either Oregon or Washington, or perhaps both, if resources permit. If successful, such efforts could eventually help the party influence gubernatorial contests, battles for state legislatures, or, more ambitiously, in congressional and Senate races—a prospect that's already drawing attention from important Washington Democrats.

"They have the organizing capacity to be a triple threat for national Democrats," says Schumer, who heads the Democratic Senatorial Campaign Committee. "They can bring disaffected 'Reagan Democrats' back into the fold, they attract independents, and they provide a place for crossover Republicans. They work very well with Democrats. That's not to say they do everything we want, but they see a common cause." The WFP also plans to try to legalize fusion voting elsewhere—it's legal in South Carolina, South Dakota, Connecticut, Mississippi, and Delaware, in addition to New York. The party hopes to add three or four states by 2008 and another eight to 10 by 2012.

But is the WFP's success really exportable? New York's political culture is unique to say the least, and the obstacles are formidable. The process of getting fusion voting—or "open-ballot

voting," as the party prefers calling it—legalized in other states is arduous and expensive. It's awfully tough to persuade political organizers and donors to channel resources into something obscure, tough to explain, and a long way from bearing fruit. What's more, though the numbers show otherwise, WFP officials frequently encounter resistance from institutional Democrats who argue that the WFP doesn't bring in new voters and just moves voters from the Democratic column to their own. Still other Democrats fret that fusion initiatives open the door to similar efforts on the right, making it possible for Republicans to join forces with, say, an anti-tax party or a pro-gun party. The odds are daunting to say the least.

From where Cantor was sitting in that hotel in Scotland 17 years ago, the odds that he'd build a third party from scratch looked pretty daunting, too.

Cantor is rapping his knuckles on the table. He's sitting in a restaurant near the WFP's headquarters in Brooklyn, holding forth on one of his cardinal frustrations: The knee-jerk insistence by Democrats that the WFP is just another Green Party. "This is not Naderism," he says emphatically, in a tone that suggests that he's not exactly thrilled to be repeating the phrase yet again.

To puncture suspicions, Cantor—a slim, energetic 50-year-old with a salt-and-pepper beard—rattles off a long speech about the history of fusion voting in America. Though it's all but disappeared, fusion voting was a big part of post-Civil War political life, fueling some of the great insurgencies in American politics, such as the 19th-century alliance of northern Democrats and Populists, which culminated in 1896 in the candidacy of William Jennings Bryan. He lost to the big business candidate that year, William McKinley.

"If you were a Democrat in the 1880s, you were probably Catholic, possibly an immigrant, urban, and wet—you drank," Cantor adds. "If you were a populist, you were rural, protestant, native-born, and dry. Culturally these things didn't fit together. Politically, it was the worker-farmer alliance of the 19th century."

After Bryan's loss, moneyed interests worked to outlaw fusion voting in many states, almost completely eliminating it by the Depression. In the 1930s, James Farley, a top political operative of Franklin Delano Roosevelt, met with legendary garment workers union chief Sidney Hillman to try to revive fusion voting in New York—again to join culturally diverse constituencies behind a common agenda. "The story," says Cantor, "is that Hillman said to Farley, 'We have a lot of Italian and Jewish Socialist garment workers and they wanna vote for FDR, but they don't wanna do it on a capitalist [Democratic] party line.' Farley said, 'Fine, no problem. Set up your own damn party and we'll just count their votes with ours.'" As it happened, because fusion voting hadn't been used extensively in New York, it hadn't been outlawed.

Many in New York have since used it as a backdoor way of building power. New York's Conservative Party, for example, can give a Republican candidate for governor upward of 300,000 votes—handy to the GOP, since Republican voters are outnum-

bered in New York State by Democrats by a 5-to-3 majority. The Conservative boss—a tough-talking, ex-Marine-turned-liquor-store-owner named Mike Long—is a major power broker. On the left, there was most notably the Liberal Party, a once-venerable outfit that devolved into a patronage mill for its chief, Raymond Harding, a rotund, Camel-inhaling creature of a vanished era.

By the late 1990s—after they'd tried to launch an ill-fated national minor party called the "New Party" with the help of political operative Joel Rogers—Cantor, Master, and allies like the United Auto Workers and the grass-roots group ACORN had concluded that a local effort was far more likely to succeed, given New York's laws. By then Harding's outfit was so ideologically hollowed out that there was an opening for a real progressive party. Polling convinced them that the best name was the Working Families Party. New York law requires that to become legal, an aspiring party needs to get a minimum of 50,000 votes in a gubernatorial election (established parties have to do this every four years to stay in business). With the 1998 gubernatorial race looming, the WFP gave its line to the Democrat and got to work.

When the votes were first counted on Election Night, the news was grim—the WFP had fallen around 5,000 votes short. At an East Village pizza shop that was serving as party headquarters that night, Master stood up on a chair and delivered a crestfallen defeat speech to a couple hundred young, tearful volunteers. "I think



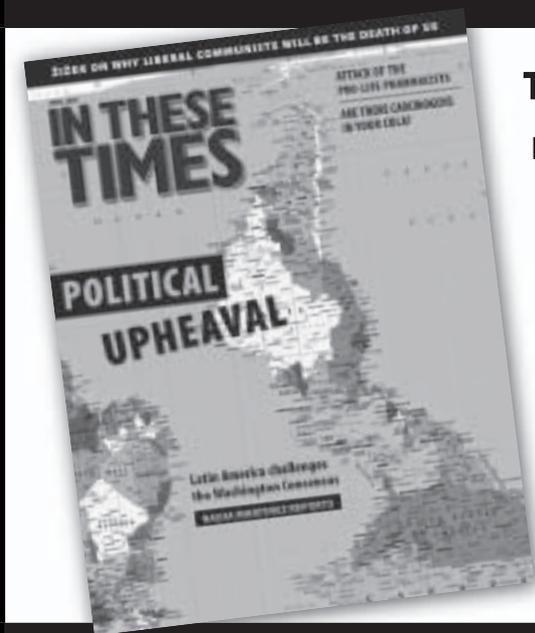
Party Dude: Dan Cantor

I literally cried that night—and it wasn't from happiness," Cantor says. But several weeks later, they were thrilled to learn from election officials that, with absentee and other ballots, their final tally was 51,325. (The Liberal Party finally expired in 2003, shortly after its gubernatorial candidate, Andrew Cuomo, failed to draw 50,000 votes.)

Over the next few years, the WFP, assisted by Patrick Gaspard, an experienced New York political operative, successfully allied with Democrats in dozens of local races across the state, slowly building a party infrastructure. Visibility and turnout soared with Hillary Clinton's 2000 Senate election. And with the growth of power inevitably came the need for expediency and deal cutting to get things done—such as supporting Republicans whom the WFP deemed good on their issues. Democrats were infuriated a couple years back when the WFP endorsed several Republican state senate candidates who would help override GOP Governor George Pataki's veto of a minimum-wage increase. Some argued that the defeat of one opposing Democrat, a black female, was a blow to progressivism in the broader sense. "At times their focus on particular issues has put them in conflict with the Democratic Party, and even with progressive goals in general," says one top New York Democrat.

WFP allies say, however, that the relentless focus on a few issues has enabled the party to rack up concrete progressive accomplishments—in addition to increasing the minimum wage,

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the party helped spark the first wave of Rockefeller drug-law reform in decades. “By focusing first and foremost on concrete ways to help the significant percentage of the population that is struggling economically, they’ve been very successful in arguing substance and ideology to voters,” says New York Attorney General Eliot Spitzer. “They’ve gone against the grain.”

S O IS THE WFP’S SUCCESS EXPORTABLE? IT SEEMS CLEAR that the WFP could succeed elsewhere at enticing liberals who want to make a statement against Democratic centrism. But Cantor argues that WFP’s real importance is that it can tip close races by luring many independents, young voters suspicious of the major parties, traditional Democrats whose party loyalty has eroded and would thus vote Republican, and even the occasional moderate Republican.

Cantor insists that his party has unlocked the code that will crack what he calls the Democrats’ “What’s the Matter with Kansas” problem—the recent failure of Democrats to get blue-collar whites to focus on economic issues rather than cultural

The WFP can solve the Democrats’ “What’s the Matter with Kansas” problem because it can focus on the economy and duck divisive cultural issues.

politics. This is possible, Cantor argues, because minor parties aren’t under the same pressure as major ones are to talk about their positions on all issues including hot-button cultural ones. The WFP avoids these issues by and large, and therefore doesn’t have the cultural baggage that the Democratic Party does. The WFP’s freedom to speak single-mindedly about “kitchen table” issues, Cantor claims, allows it to make a strong case to Republican-trending voters who can vote their economic interest—that is, for the Democrat on the WFP line—without endorsing the Democratic positions that repel them.

“We can say, ‘We’re not here to talk about guns or abortion. We’re only here to talk about wages, health care, and education,’” Cantor says. “That allows us to reach voters who would never self-identify as progressives.”

It’s easy to be skeptical of Cantor’s argument. Why would a nonprogressive turned off by a Democratic candidate’s position on social issues suddenly overlook those positions if the candidate’s name were on a different ballot line? WFP officials point to a 2002 Long Island congressional race in which Democrat Tim Bishop upset sitting GOP Congressman Felix Grucci by 2,700 votes. Bishop won 2,900 on the WFP line—the margin of victory. Of those, 1,600 voted for Bishop—and here’s the key—even as they also backed either GOP Governor George Pataki or Conservative Party candidate Tom Golisano for governor. That means more than half of Bishop’s supporters were ticket-splitters—and likely would have backed Grucci without the WFP option. “All we need to do is shift a tiny percentage of voters to completely alter a race’s outcome,” Cantor argues.

WFP officials also argue that they might appeal to culturally conservative voters who trend Republican because, surprisingly, people are inclined to view the WFP as a centrist party, not a left-wing one. You’d think the WFP’s call for expansionist government would leave it easily pigeonholed as a party of the left. But many voters apparently don’t see it that way. A recent WFP poll of voters in three battleground states—Ohio, Missouri, and Washington—were asked to rate the party on a scale where 1 was very liberal and 9 was very conservative, after having been told that the WFP fights on “pocketbook” issues “like the outsourcing of jobs to other countries” and “increasing the minimum wage.” A surprising 57 percent of voters labeled the WFP at 5 or above.

Still, these numbers don’t guarantee national success. For starters, the first and most critical hurdle the party faces—launching successful initiatives to legalize fusion voting—is an uphill one. The WFP says its polling in several states shows majority support for open ballot initiatives, but no one has mobilized against it yet. If the WFP’s efforts grow more visible, the GOP and some corporate interests may well channel money into defeating fusion voting, just as they did at the close of the 19th century. And if that happens, the WFP will likely be badly outgunned.

Also, the party may be seen by many as a centrist party when it defines itself. But there’s no telling how people would see it should right-leaning commentators and other fusion opponents start painting it as, say, a tool of labor (the source of much WFP funding), or as a redistributionist conspiracy hatched in liberal New York. Finally, it’s unclear whether establishment Democrats will lend serious backing to an ambitious effort with an uncertain outcome, particularly since the WFP, while it helps Democrats win elections and strengthens the party’s progressive wing, splits candidate loyalty between the two parties.

“The challenge for WFP is to convince institutional Democrats nationally that they should invest resources in something that may take years to bear fruit,” says Robert Zimmerman, a top fund-raiser and Democratic National Committeeman from New York. “They also need to show Democrats that they don’t dilute the party’s institutional control over elected candidates.”

In Massachusetts, organizers have collected 109,000 signatures and need another 10,000 or so for a fusion-voting initiative to make the November ballot. In Oregon, the WFP has persuaded many power brokers to support the idea of forming a party there. And in Delaware, the WFP has nearly collected the signatures to create a party there. “Progressives all across the country are fighting huge defensive battles all the time—fending off this attack or that bad referendum,” says Master. “We’re here to say, ‘We’re on the offensive in New York because of this party,’ and we think we can replicate that across the country. It will be a really potent weapon in the arsenal of Democrats and their allies who want to retake power in America.” **TAP**

Greg Sargent, a contributing editor at New York magazine, writes bi-weekly for The American Prospect Online.