
Coates' Canons Blog: North Carolina's Four (Yes, Four) Political Parties

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UPDATE November 2013: *Americans Elect did not prove to be a viable political party and failed to qualify for continued recognition in North Carolina.*

No doubt you can name the two biggest political parties officially recognized in North Carolina: just over 2.73 million Tar Heel voters have registered to vote as Democrats and just under 2 million as Republicans. And you may be able to name the third, the Libertarian Party, with its 14,000 members. But what's that fourth party?

It's Americans Elect, whose status as a recognized political party was certified by the State Board of Elections on April 13, 2012. Official recognition means that a party's candidates may appear on the state's election ballots.

Americans Elect

Americans Elect ("AE") is a very unusual party. In fact, it does not even describe itself as a political party, saying instead, in the words of its website, that it

- is "a modern reimagining of the presidential nominating process,"
- is "merely an infrastructure for the nominating process,"
- is a "nonprofit and nonpartisan organization,"
- will "not support or advocate for any candidate, candidate committee, ideology, or issue," and
- "does not give money to nor accept money from any candidate or candidate committee."

AE says that it has two functions and only two functions. The first is to create an on-line process for nominating candidates for president and vice president to run in the 2012 November general election. The second is to get on the ballot in all 50 states so that the nominees who emerge from the on-line process will be able to run nationwide.

The first of those goals, the on-line nomination, is about to be achieved. The process is scheduled to begin with on-line "caucuses" on May 8 and to conclude with the nomination of candidates for president and vice president in an on-line "convention" set for June 12 (with second- and third-round ballots, if necessary, on June 19 and 26).

Accomplishment of the second goal—to be on the ballot in all 50 states—brought AE to North Carolina about a year ago. AE representatives have been soliciting signatures from North Carolina voters to achieve recognition as a political party so that its nominees, whoever they turn out to be, can automatically be on the presidential ballot here. Under state law, GS 163-96, recognition of a new political party requires petitions with signatures equaling 2% of the total number of voters who voted in the most recent election for governor. That 2% number turned out to be 85,379 after the 2008 election for governor, and AE met that requirement, as the April 13 State Board certification shows.

Because its goals are limited to the creation of a new on-line nominating process and to assuring ballot access in all 50 states, AE says that once its nominees are named, it will not have a role in helping to elect them. It will have launched the nominees and assured spots on the ballot, but unlike the Republican or Democratic Party, "Americans Elect is not a traditional political party that is going to run [its nominees'] campaign. We provide ballot access and the online convention. We exist to facilitate, not to direct."

AE says that accomplishing its two goals will cost about \$30 million, half for ballot access efforts and half for building the technology necessary for the caucuses and convention and for other operational expenses. No funds will be used, AE says, for campaigning or electioneering.

AE has not disclosed its donors but claims that it has more than 3,000 donors, with a dozen giving more than \$100,000 each. All donations above \$10,000 are structured as loans, so that, if enough money is raised, no one donor will have contributed more than \$10,000. No funds are accepted, AE says, from foreign sources, corporations, special interests, lobbyists, political parties, PAC's, or campaign committees.

Any registered voter in the United States can go to the AE website and, by following the procedures there, sign up as a delegate. Candidates for president may declare themselves (as has Buddy Roemer, former governor of Louisiana) or may be drafted by committees formed on-line by signed-up delegates.

Each of the six top candidates emerging from the May on-line "caucuses" will select a vice-presidential running mate who must exhibit "differing ideological perspective" from the presidential candidate—for instance, if one is a Republican the other must be a Democrat, or otherwise demonstrate satisfactory difference in perspective.

As a result of the April 13 State Board of Elections certification, the successful AE nominees for president and vice president will be on the North Carolina general election ballot in November.

Third Parties in North Carolina Presidential Elections

Since 1900, no third party candidate (that is, a candidate who was neither a Republican nor a Democrat) has carried North Carolina in a presidential election. Twice, however, they have finished second.

- In 1912, former president Theodore Roosevelt, running on the Progressive Party ticket, received 28.4% of the vote in North Carolina, finishing ahead of William Howard Taft, the Republican nominee and sitting president. Woodrow Wilson, Democrat, won.
- In 1968, George Wallace, governor of Alabama, running on the American Independent Party ticket, received 31.3%, finishing ahead of Hubert Humphrey, the Democratic nominee and sitting vice president. Richard Nixon, Republican, won.

Three other times, third party candidates have received at least 6% of the vote in North Carolina.

- In 1948, Strom Thurmond received 8.8% as the candidate of the States Rights Democratic Party.
- In 1992, Ross Perot received 13.7% as the candidate of the Independent Party.
- In 1996, Ross Perot received 6.7% as the candidate of the Reform Party.

The Libertarian Party has had candidates on the presidential ballot in North Carolina in every election since 1976, never receiving as much as 1% of the vote. Off and on over the years since 1900 there have been presidential candidates on the ballot in North Carolina from the Reform Party, the Natural Law Party, the Independent Party, the New Alliance Party, the American Party, the American Independent Party, the Progressive Party, the States Rights Democratic Party, the Socialist Party, the Union Party, and the Prohibition Party. The last election in which there was no third party candidate was in 1964.

Some Questions

1. May North Carolina voters register as members of the Americans Elect party just as they may register as Republicans, Democrats, or Libertarians?

Yes.

2. How many have?

None or very few so far. The voter registration books closed, as they do before every election, 25 days before the May 8 election. That was the very time that AE was certified as a party. It is possible that some voters have registered with AE at one-stop early voting sites, where registration is permitted by law, but surely that number, if any, is very small.

3. Is AE eligible to put candidates on the November ballot for offices other than president and vice president?

Yes, but it apparently has no plans to. Its sole purpose for existence is to provide a vehicle for nominating candidates for president and vice president and getting them on the states' ballots.

4. Must AE do anything else?

Apparently not. If it wished to have candidates on the ballot for state offices, it would be required under GS 163-98 to hold a state convention, but since it has no such plans, there appears to be no convention requirement.

5. May North Carolina voters who are registered as Republicans, Democrats, or Libertarians participate as delegates in the voting in the AE on-line caucuses and on-line nomination convention?

Apparently yes. The relevant North Carolina statute, GS 163-166.7, indicates that only voters affiliated with a party may vote in that party's primary elections (and unaffiliated voters, if the party decides to let them). That requirement would seem to apply to North Carolina's Presidential Preference Primary, so that Republicans could not vote in the Democratic primary and vice versa, but AE is not participating in the May 8 Presidential Preference Primary and does not think of itself as a national party. Nothing in North Carolina's law would seemingly prohibit AE from accepting on-line delegate votes in its on-line convention from North Carolina members of other parties.

Links

- www.ncsbe.gov/
- www.americanselect.org/
- www.ncleg.net/gascrpts/statutes/statutelookup.pl?statute=163-96
- www.ncleg.net/gascrpts/statutes/statutelookup.pl?statute=163-166.7