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Independent Illusions

By Matt A. Mayer

Even though it seems premature to look ahead to the 2020 presidential election, given the early chatter on whether President Donald Trump would win a second term, a closer look at the electoral landscape is worthwhile.

This analysis is especially appropriate due to the increasing shift to the left by the Democratic Party and the near-declaration by Ohio Gov. John Kasich to run for the presidency again in 2020. Should the Democrats nominate a progressive in the Bernie Sanders-Elizabeth Warren wing of the party and Trump survives his first term and goes for a second term, theoretical space would exist for an independent run appealing to moderate Democrats, independents and moderate Republicans.

That space is where Kasich has appeared to aim virtually all of his actions and words since Trump's victory on Nov. 8, 2016. After all, spending the last year [criticizing nearly every action by the Republican president](#), advocating for Obamacare and its Medicaid expansion [in opposition to Republicans](#), partnering with Democrats like [Colorado Gov. John Hickenlooper](#) and former [Vice President Joe Biden](#) to undermine Republican plans, and publishing an "[I'm not Trump](#)" book likely isn't the pathway to defeat Trump in a primary, especially after getting trounced by Trump in the 2016. It is, however, the pathway to a post-gubernatorial speech in early 2019 that talks about how Kasich didn't leave the Republican Party, it left him, as part of becoming and running as an independent.

Assuming Kasich can overcome the obstacles of getting on the ballot in all 50 states and the District of Columbia, is there really a pathway to winning the Electoral College as an independent? Remember, it takes more than winning a plurality of the popular vote; it takes winning 270 electoral votes.

History can serve as a rough guide on this critical question. In 1992, with [just under 19 percent of the vote](#), Ross Perot earned the highest vote total of any independent candidate in modern history. How many electoral votes did he secure? Zero. zilch. Nada. In fact, the closest he got to winning a state was in Maine where he came within 8 percentage points of Bill Clinton (38.77 percent to 30.44 percent). Perot got within 11 percentage points in Alaska, Kansas, Montana and Nevada, but soundly lost in every other state. The conventional wisdom is Perot took more votes from George H.W. Bush than Clinton so likely secured the victory for the latter.

Fast-forward to 2016. Trump or Hillary Clinton [won 32 states and D.C.](#) by 12 percentage points or more. Trump even won Utah by 18 percentage points despite the strong campaign by Never-Trump Utahan Evan McMullin, who secured 21.5 percent of the vote. In the remaining 18 states, five were won by 8 or more percentage points (Delaware, Iowa, New Mexico, Ohio and Texas). That leaves just 13 states where one of the two major party candidates won by 5 or fewer percentage points.

While it is theoretically possible an independent candidate could shock the system in 2020 by peeling off enough of the voters in enough of the states who went for Trump or Clinton in 2016 to win the Electoral College, it is far more likely such a candidate would, like Perot, merely narrow the winning margins of each side. There is an outside chance an independent candidate could even win a state or two out of the 13 states won by 5 or fewer percentage points in 2016. In that scenario, beyond helping one of the other candidates win, such an outcome could push the U.S. into constitutionally uncharted territory. Specifically, if no candidate obtains the 270-vote threshold, the U.S. House of Representatives would decide the winner with each state delegation getting one vote.

Because virtually all of the members of the U.S. House are registered Democrats and Republicans, it is highly unlikely that the independent candidate could secure the majority of state delegation votes. This secondary obstacle makes an independent victory exceedingly unlikely and a run amounting to little more than a Sisyphean task.

Thus, should Kasich decide to run in 2020 as an independent, he would be doing so in an effort purely to oust Trump and hand the presidency to the Democratic Party. Such a move would make him the darling of Democrats, the media and elites, but persona non-grata among the Republicans who put him in office from 1979 to 2019. Ohioans already are growing increasingly weary of Kasich's anti-Trump zealotry, with [all four Republican candidates running to replace Kasich openly criticizing him](#) and the [Ohio General Assembly overriding Kasich vetoes](#) and aiming to [curtail his budget-busting Medicaid expansion](#).

Despite the drama surrounding the Trump presidency, Republicans still strongly support him. They believe fervently that his appointment of Neil Gorsuch to the U.S. Supreme Court, as well as dozens of solid conservative appellate court appointments, his rollback of Obama administration rules and regulations, including on

Obamacare, and his America-first posture on foreign policy and trade deals are helping to "make America great" again. The coterie of Never-Trump politicians and pundits on the right who refuse to acknowledge this reality, including potential 2020 opponents like Kasich, are deluding themselves on beating Trump.

More egregiously, their "I told you so" position rests on a foundation made entirely of hope that Trump ultimately fails. Electoral College obstacles notwithstanding, it is very hard to see a majority or plurality of Americans support a politician who tacitly needed America to lose under Trump in order for them to win in 2020.

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