

WFP De-Fusion by Dan Jacoby

City Hall News has an excellent analysis of WFP's problems with Andrew Cuomo, and how the party is in danger of losing its automatic ballot status as a result.¹ This whole fight demonstrates yet another dysfunctional aspect of elections in New York state – the "fusion" ticket.

Under state law, a party needs to get 50,000 votes for their candidate for governor in order to gain automatic ballot status for the next four years. For the successful minor parties, this almost always means nominating either the Democratic or Republican candidate for their party as well, thus creating a fusion ticket, and then getting enough people who are going to vote for one of the major party nominees anyway but want to "send a message" that the major parties are lousy to vote on the minor party line.

The result is that minor parties are denied the opportunity to float their own candidates. Generally, they are merely adjuncts of the major parties, with no real power of their own.

The Working Families Party has spent the last several years inserting itself into hotly contested Democratic primaries in safe Democratic seats, especially in New York City, and spending a lot of their own money "independently" to get their chosen candidate nominated. Then they claim to be the margin of victory – the kingmaker. In 2005, they claimed credit for Scott Stringer's victory in the Manhattan Borough President's race. In 2008 their top candidate was Dan Squadron. In 2009, they made major investments in half a dozen successful City Council races, plus helping Bill de Blasio become the city's Public Advocate.

Never mind that outside of NYC their success rate is dismal, or that even in the city they have had their share of failures – the strategy worked. For a while, that is. A year ago, Democrats were falling over themselves to get the WFP line.

Now along comes Cuomo, who appears to have adopted the strategy of moving toward the center in his bid to reform Albany without pissing too many people off the way Eliot Spitzer did. In doing so, he has angered the unions, who form the backbone of the left wing in New York, and who supply the WFP with its money. Suddenly, the WFP is in danger of not having the Democratic nominee for governor on their line as well -- and they may not have anyone who stands a good chance of getting 50,000 votes.

The problem, however, is not with WFP's modus operandi. They are merely playing the game the best way they know how. The problem is with the setup itself. The combination of an extremely high bar for minor parties to get on the ballot and the availability of fusion tickets is the problem. The solution, therefore, is to prohibit fusion tickets while making it easier for political parties to get on the ballot.

Prohibiting fusion tickets is straightforward and simple, and needs no explanation. How to achieve an easier method for ballot access deserves serious debate, because there are many ways to accomplish this. Perhaps the WFP's current problems can jumpstart this debate.

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¹ <http://www.cityhallnews.com/newyork/article-1297-wfp-faces-perils-in-picking-placeholder-post-cuomo-pass-on-line.html>