

And then there was the Citizens Party

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Abstract: [...]if only a handful of Americans recognized the party's name, an impressive 22 percent of the recognizers also pulled the party's lever. so it can be said that, in the case of more than one-fifth of those unusually informed voters, to know the Citizens Party was to love it.

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Full Text: Republicans are now first in the hearts of their countrymen, even if Democrats can still claim title to many of our residual affections. But who shall inherit the future? Who among the also-rans is likely to outlast the flashy front-runners? I am watching a long shot, the Citizens Party, a feisty bunch who this year ran Barry Commoner for president and LaDonna Harris -- a charismatic Comanche from Oklahoma -- for vice-president. Political "solar mates," those two have been called, and not only because of their views on energy; also because the sun seems to smile on them wherever they go. In any case, the 1980 election was the party's debut on the national scene and, rickety as it appeared to pundits, to me it signaled the start of something useful in American politics: a brand of liberalism suited to the times and its perplexities. If you haven't heard of the Citizens Party you are, according to the pollsters, at one with 94 percent of the electorate. Name recognition was not the party's strong suit this time around. Nor, for that matter, was voter attraction. Although Commoner and Harris succeeded in getting on ballots in 36 states, they collected only 270,000 votes nationwide, well below 1 percent of all votes cast. Still, when seen through the eyes of an infant political movement, the good news may have outweighed the bad. For one thing, the party spent only about one dollar per Commoner vote, which was slightly less than what each vote cost Reagan, Carter, or Anderson. The heady assumption here is that if the party had been able to raise more money with which to publicize its message it would have attracted more votes. For another, in many locales the party ran candidates for lesser offices, and some of these fared relatively well. For instance, Robin Lloyd, a filmmaker in Burlington, Vt., got 13 percent of the vote in her bid for Congress. "In general," says Bert DeLieuw, the party's national executive director in Washington, "the further down we went on the ticket, the better our candidates did." Finally, if only a handful of Americans recognized the party's name, an impressive 22 percent of the recognizers also pulled the party's lever. so it can be said that, in the case of more than one-fifth of those unusually informed voters, to know the Citizens Party was to love it. "It may not have been the best start in the world," concedes Mr. DeLieuw, "but we picked up a lot of support from young people and from people who hadn't been involved in politics before. I think they'll stay with us for the long haul. There's a lot of postelection enthusiasm." What impels these political amateurs to continue the hard struggle? It is risky to capsule the philosophy of any political group, even a small one, but here goes a try. The Citizens Party thinks that ordinary people have temporarily lost their way in a world increasingly dominated by centralized government and global corporations, with emphasis on the latter. The consequences of this concentrated power seem clear enough: chronic unemployment coupled with chronic inflation; chemical and nuclear assaults on our well-being (Love Canal, Three-Mile Island); massive "bailouts" of incompetent, bankrupt companies (Chrysler and Lockheed, with others waiting in the wings); "runaway" mills that leave whole towns in the lurch (for instance, the steel industry's abandonment of Youngstown, Ohio); a spend-thrift obsession with defense that confuses "overkill" with security; and an imperial foreign policy aimed at making the world safe for IBM. The party's solutions are less clear. In general, as Mr. DeLieuw notes, it wants to "democratize the production system -- to take control of the economy away from the corporations and put it back into the hands of the citizens." And, like its philosophical ancestor, the Populist party of a century ago, it is

calling for worker and consumer cooperatives and for more local or "grassroots" initiatives. Admittedly, these do not yet add up to a program that Americans are likely to understand or support. But they do raise vital questions, questions that the major parties have almost totally ignored. What Nearly half the eligible voters this year did not vote. According to post-election surveys, many of the stay-at-homes thought the major candidates had been debating largely irrelevant issues -- which may be another way of saying that the Citizens Party is the only organized political voice in the land currently asking many of the right questions. Credit: By Richard J. Margolis; Richard J. Margolis, a political writer, says he voted for Jimmy Carter but his heart was with Barry Commoner. Illustration Caption: Picture, Barry Commoner and LaDonna Harris, UPI photo

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