Third-party, no-affiliation voters may make a big impact in Florida

By Bill Thompson
Staff writer
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Two days before Election Day, more than 12,000 Republican voters in Marion County have already expressed their choice to be their party's presidential nominee, according to county elections officials.

And as thousands more Republicans head to the polls on Tuesday, local Democrats will sit this one out, waiting to see how the outcome in Florida will shape the GOP race to take on President Barack Obama.

Whether voting or waiting, however, the faithful within the major parties are a dwindling lot.

The overall percentage of voters identifying with the Democratic and Republican parties — in Marion County and the state as a whole — has ebbed to its lowest point at any time in recent memory.

But, some observers say, the erosion of voters from the ranks of the major parties does not mean the parties' grip on power will soon be loosened.

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Nearly one in four voters in Florida is registered as something other than a Democrat or a Republican, or not affiliated with any party at all, according to state Division of Elections records.

In Marion County, the rate is about one in every five.

Headed into Tuesday's Republican primary, the percentage of election-year voters in Florida who identify themselves with the GOP is at one of the lowest points since 1994, the last year of election-year voter registration data posted on the DOE's website.

Despite claiming roughly 4.1 million registered voters at the moment, the Republican Party of Florida still represents just 36.2 percent of the electorate.

In 1994 — a watershed year when the GOP, led by then-Rep. Newt Gingrich, upended 40 years of Democratic rule in Congress — about 42 percent of Sunshine State voters were Republicans.
Things look much better for the GOP here than in the rest of Florida: 42.3 percent of registered Marion voters are Republican. But that is the second-lowest percentage in 18 years.

Democrats, on the other hand, continue to outnumber Republicans statewide, with almost 4.6 million voters. But the party has nearly bottomed out: 40.5 percent of registered voters around the state claim to be a Democrat.

Marion Democrats have followed the same arc downward. The party counted nearly 49 percent of local voters in 1994; today, they stand at 38 percent.

Joining minor parties or the ranks of the unaffiliated has never been more popular.

Across Florida, more than 2.6 million registered voters — or 23.3 percent — belong to a small party or have opted out of them altogether.

Today’s ratio of voters who avoid both the Democrats and the Republicans nearly triples what it was in 1994.

And the climb in that rate has been steady, increasing each election year for the past two decades.

The fleeing of voters from the two major parties can also be measured in a different way.

Eighteen years ago, state elections officials recognized 11 political parties, including the Democrats and the GOP.

Today, Florida officially has 28 parties.

Beyond the two major ones, they include the Independent Party of Florida, the largest among the smaller ones with 257,258 members, to the Americans Elect Florida and Modern Whig parties, each of which has four members.

Aubrey Jewett, a political science professor at the University of Central Florida, said in an email this flight does worry the major parties.

The effect in closed primary states like Florida is to drive primary votes and the candidates themselves to more ideological extremes, he added.

But in the general election the parties must work hard to attract and mobilize those people, who are typically less interested and less passionate about politics.

“These NPAs (no party affiliation) and minor party registrants are more likely to be swing voters and have less loyalty to a particular party,” Jewett said. “The close registration between the two major parties and the increasing number of NPAs and
minor party registrants is one of the reasons that Florida has a deserved reputation as a swing state in presidential elections over the past 20 years."

The disdain many voters increasingly feel toward the major parties, though, is unlikely to erode the power of the Democrats and Republicans anytime soon, observers said.

Kevin Wagner, a political science professor at Florida Atlantic University, said the act of registering with a particular political party has lost its importance.

Parties, he said, tend to “marketing organizations” that promote a brand. To succeed, they must capture a broad audience.

Small parties, typically based on single issues or very narrow platforms, are not there yet, he said.

“If [as a minor party candidate] you got 10 percent of every district in the country, you’d have a lot of people, but you wouldn’t get very far,” Wagner noted.

“The major parties are relatively secure by the design of our democracy, and a third party is not likely to replace them anytime soon. One major function of parties is to win elections, and if that’s the goal, then they (Democrats and Republicans) are doing all right.”

“People like to be independent, but there is a psyche among voters that they don’t want to waste their vote. Americans like to vote for winners.”

Matt Welch, editor of Reason, a libertarian magazine, who with Nick Gillespie, editor in chief of Reason.com, co-authored “The Declaration of Independents,” a book exploring the rise of independent voters, said winning elections is not necessarily the immediate goal to undermine what they refer to as the “duopoly” controlling the political system.

More voters are “disaffiliating” with the major parties, he said, because they find the major parties’ platforms internally inconsistent and are disappointed with their record of actual governing.

An outsider such as 1992 Reform Party candidate Ross Perot or Jesse Ventura, the former Minnesota governor, is not likely to upset the system because ballot-access rules are prohibitive to minor parties, and because of the vast pool of money. Within the current system, Welch added, the sizeable contingent outside the Democratic and Republican “tribes” can influence policy by identifying a specific issue and expressing how the major parties should handle it — much as tea partiers did with the GOP and the national debt.

“That is how you apply this kind of independent thinking,” Welch said. “If everyone becomes a swing voter, then you can get them to change their behavior.”
Paul Truesdell, chairman of the Ocala-based Florida Whig Party, fielded candidates at all levels two years ago in the hope of demonstrating there was an alternative.

“Each day, more Americans are coming to the conclusion that duopolistic politics is more about profiteering through a spoils system disguised by a byzantine bureaucracy than maintaining government by the people rather than of the people,” Truesdell said in an email.

“What we have are always-competing medusa-octopui that spin the media and general public opinion nonstop for the sole purpose of controlling the purse strings.”

He added that the major parties could win back voters by “telling the truth and then implement(ing) actions that match without being colored by the flavor of the day. “However,” he said, “don't hold your breath.”

He maintained that top-down movements like Perot’s and bottom-up grassroots efforts are difficult to sustain, and thus cannot threaten the major parties.

Still, he believes the number of voters opting for something different indicates the Democrats and Republicans might be on borrowed time.

“The needed and lasting strength of the next political diamond will need to occur simultaneously with a broad appeal to the middle after extreme pressure by the Republicrat party. The day will come when an alignment of interests clicks,” Truesdell said.

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The dominance of the major parties might not be in jeopardy, but party stalwarts on both sides realize they need minor-party and unaffiliated voters to win.

Alex Patton, a Republican political consultant in Gainesville, said some of those voters are “truly independent” and some of them are “lowly engaged” in politics and register with a party for the sake of registering.

He believes they are “parked” outside both major parties for the foreseeable future and thus are “problematic” for politicians and strategists.

Voters outside the two-party system tend to be “fickle” right up to Election Day, Patton said, and as such, those voters have an impact because candidates must expend more resources trying to win them over — with no guarantee of success.

He added that it was too early to tell whether the GOP presidential candidates were losing such voters by offering staunchly Republican proposals in trying to win the nomination.

Yet, Patton had no doubt about their influence in November.
“The independents are going to decide who's going to be president,” he said.

President Obama relied heavily on independent voters in winning in 2008, but a recent poll showed he's in trouble with them now.

A New York Times/CBS News poll released in mid-January found that 52 percent of self-identified independent voters disapprove of how Obama handles his job.

Only 36 percent of that voting bloc trusted him more on dealing with the economy, compared to 41 percent who felt congressional Republicans could better manage the economy.

“Neither party has successfully made everybody happy within their party. Especially in these economic times, I think a lot of voters are throwing their hands up and saying, ‘Nobody is giving me what I want,’ ” Brian Franklin, a Democratic consultant from Weston, said of the defections from the major parties.

Franklin said it was too early to tell what factor — such as the economy, the GOP nominee, or something unforeseen — might influence the independents. But Democrats recognize they can't dismiss them.

“Every effort will be made to bring them back” to support Obama, Franklin said. “And many of those people will come back.”

“A lot of people might not be happy with the president and say they won't vote for him, but then they look around at who he's running against and say, ‘I can't let that happen either.’ ”