Third parties attract few votes, can have big impact

By Anthony Man, Sun Sentinel

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Given up on Barack Obama? Scared of Mitt Romney?

In what's proven startling to some, a distraction to others — and maybe politically significant to everyone — there are a slew of other presidential candidates on the ballot in Florida.

The 10 others range from serious hopefuls with no chance to, frankly, less serious candidates with no chance.

The list of names, alphabetically by last name, including Obama and Romney, left Sam Hoffman scratching his head.

"I don't know what their point is," said Hoffman, a retiree who lives west of Delray Beach. "Why would people choose them? That's my problem."

The three-letter labels for each party — DEM for Democratic, REP for Republican, SOC for Socialist and PSL for Party for Socialism and Liberation — don't help much.

Hoffman said he recognized one candidate: Peace & Freedom standard-bearer Roseanne Barr, best known as the star of the long-running sitcom Roseanne. She had a short-lived talk show and was widely condemned for her off-key rendition of "The Star-Spangled Banner" before a baseball game in 1990.

She's shown on her campaign website with a Statue of Liberty-like crown. There's also a large picture of a marijuana leaf, which makes clear the central platform of her campaign, legalization of the drug.

Karl Dickey of Boca Raton, former chairman of the Libertarian Party of Florida, doesn't think all the third party candidates should get lumped together.

He supports Gary Johnson, the former Republican governor of New Mexico. Johnson has a platform that could appeal to people on the left because of its strong civil liberties, anti-military leanings, and to the right because of its strong positions on cutting the debt.

"I have a strong conviction that people should vote for who is most in line with their values and he [Johnson] is that for me," he said. If someone feels that's Obama, Romney or Green Party candidate Jill Stein, that's a legitimate vote in his view. "Maybe some of these people are kooks, but Jill Stein is not a kook. Gary Johnson is not a kook."
Dickey said he doesn't buy the notion he'll be wasting his vote — or that votes for a third-party candidate could take enough votes away from Obama or Romney that the other candidate would win Florida and its 29 electoral votes.

That's what happened in 2000, when Green Party candidate Ralph Nader won 97,488 votes and George W. Bush beat Al Gore by 537 votes statewide. Everyone in politics on both sides of the aisle believes if Nader hadn't been on the ballot, Gore would have won Florida.

"It's hardly even a consideration on my end. I have a strong conviction that I should vote for somebody I believe in," Dickey said. "For me to roll over and vote for Romney or Obama simply because one of them is going to win is not even a question for me."

The CNN/Opinion Research Corporation poll of likely Florida voters last week included several third-party candidates and showed Obama and Romney tied at 48 percent, with Johnson and Stein at 1 percent each.

In a race that's neck-and-neck, a third-party candidate could draw enough support to make a difference, but political scientists Robert Watson of Lynn University and Kevin Wagner of Florida Atlantic University don't think that will happen. They don't think Johnson or Stein will end up doing as well as the poll suggests.

"People will tell pollsters that they will vote for third parties in order to make a protest statement," Watson said. "The numbers in the polls very rarely hold up to the numbers on Election Day."

*Libertarian candidate Gary Johnson and Green candidate Jill Stein debate at 9 p.m. Monday at http://www.freeandequal.org.*