



Connecticut Gov. Lowell Weicker (left) won as an independent in 1990. Now Sen. Charles S. Robb (center) is threatened by two independents in Virginia, and former Maine Gov. Joseph Brennan faces a strong outsider.

# Lure of independents threatens status quo of two U.S. parties

By Donald Lambro  
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The political bickering that has turned Virginia's Senate election into a four-way race may be unique to that state, but look for more independent candidates in the years to come, say campaign analysts.

"It's a situation unique to Virginia for now," said Curtis Gans, director of the Committee for the Study of the American Electorate. "But down the road I think we are going to have more independent candidates and conceivably more parties."

Connecticut Gov. Lowell Weicker Jr. won as an independent in 1990, as did Alaska Gov. Walter Hickel.

The Ross Perot phenomenon, when the blustery billionaire came out of nowhere to win 19 percent of the vote in the 1992 presidential election, has left a strong imprint on national politics.

Many campaign strategists like Mr. Gans believe that a future independent presidential candidate, with a less volatile and more reassuring personality, could succeed where Mr. Perot failed.

In an election year when voters are described as angry, cranky, cynical and anti-incumbent, it is perhaps surprising that more major independent candidates are not running for state and congressional offices.

There are a number of minor independent candidacies around the country running under the Green Party banner, an environmental group. But none is given any chance of winning, though they can act as spoilers by drawing more votes away from Democratic candidates.

Besides Virginia, the only state where an independent is given a chance of succeeding is Maine, which has a history of electing independent candidates. In 1974 Maine elected independent James B. Longley as its governor.

In this year's gubernatorial race, former Democrat Angus King, a businessman and former talk-show host, is running as an independent on a tax-cutting, pro-business, welfare-reform platform. He is given a strong chance of winning, drawing support from Republicans as well as conservative Democrats.

Mr. King is pitted against Republican Susan Collins, a former state business regulation commissioner, and former two-term Democratic Gov. Joseph Brennan. A fourth candidate running on the Green Party ticket is expected to draw votes away from Mr. Brennan.

"King is very slick and well-packaged and has spent more money than any of the other candidates," said Ben Coes, executive director of the Maine Republican Party. "He's co-opting our message."

Like Mr. Perot, Mr. King is "a

newcomer and a creature of the media," Mr. Coes said. "The voters here tend to be cranky and independent and can surprise people."

There is only one independent member of Congress, Rep. Bernard Sanders of Vermont, a socialist.

"There are a lot of independent and Green Party candidates running in other parts of the country," said David Carney, the National Republican Senatorial Committee's political director. "None has the potential to win their races, though they have the ability to influence the outcome of some races."

But other third-party candidates may emerge later this year as contenders. "There are a number of states where independent candidates are running, but the deadlines for filing are later in the season," Mr. Carney said.

"It's becoming more acceptable for voters to consider independent candidates, and they're collecting more and more votes," Mr. Carney said. "People aren't sticking to just the two major party candidates as they once did."

"There's a huge amount of dissatisfaction out there, and over time it could result in the Balkanization of politics as a whole," said Alan Secrest, a Democratic campaign pollster.

"By and large we are talking about a process that is still in formation," he said.