

Republican Runs Street People on Green Ticket



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By Marc Lacey

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TEMPE, Ariz. □ Benjamin Percy, a candidate for statewide office in Arizona, lists his campaign office as a Starbucks. The small business he refers to in his campaign statement is him strumming his guitar on the street. The internal debate he is having in advance of his coming televised debate is whether he ought to gel his hair into his trademark faux Mohawk.

Mr. Percy, 20, is running for a seat on the [Arizona Corporation Commission](#), which oversees public utilities, railroad safety and securities regulation. Although Mr. Percy says he is taking his first run for public office seriously, the political establishment here views him as nothing more than a political dirty trick.

Mr. Percy and other drifters and homeless people were recruited onto the Green Party ballot by a Republican political operative who freely admits that their candidacies may siphon some support from the Democrats. Arizona's Democratic Party has filed a formal complaint with local, state and federal prosecutors in an effort to have the candidates removed from the ballot, and the Green Party has urged its supporters to steer clear of the rogue candidates.

“These are people who are not serious and who were recruited as part of a cynical manipulation of the process,” said Paul Eckstein, a lawyer representing the Democrats. “They don’t know Green from red.”

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But Steve May, the Republican operative who signed up some of the candidates along Mill Avenue, a bohemian commercial strip next to Arizona State University, insists that a real political movement has been stirred up that has nothing to do with subterfuge.



Benjamin Percy, 20, in white shirt, is running as a Green Party candidate in Arizona. Joshua Lott for The New York Times

“Did I recruit candidates? Yes,” said Mr. May, who is himself a candidate for the State Legislature, on the Republican ticket. “Are they fake candidates? No way.”

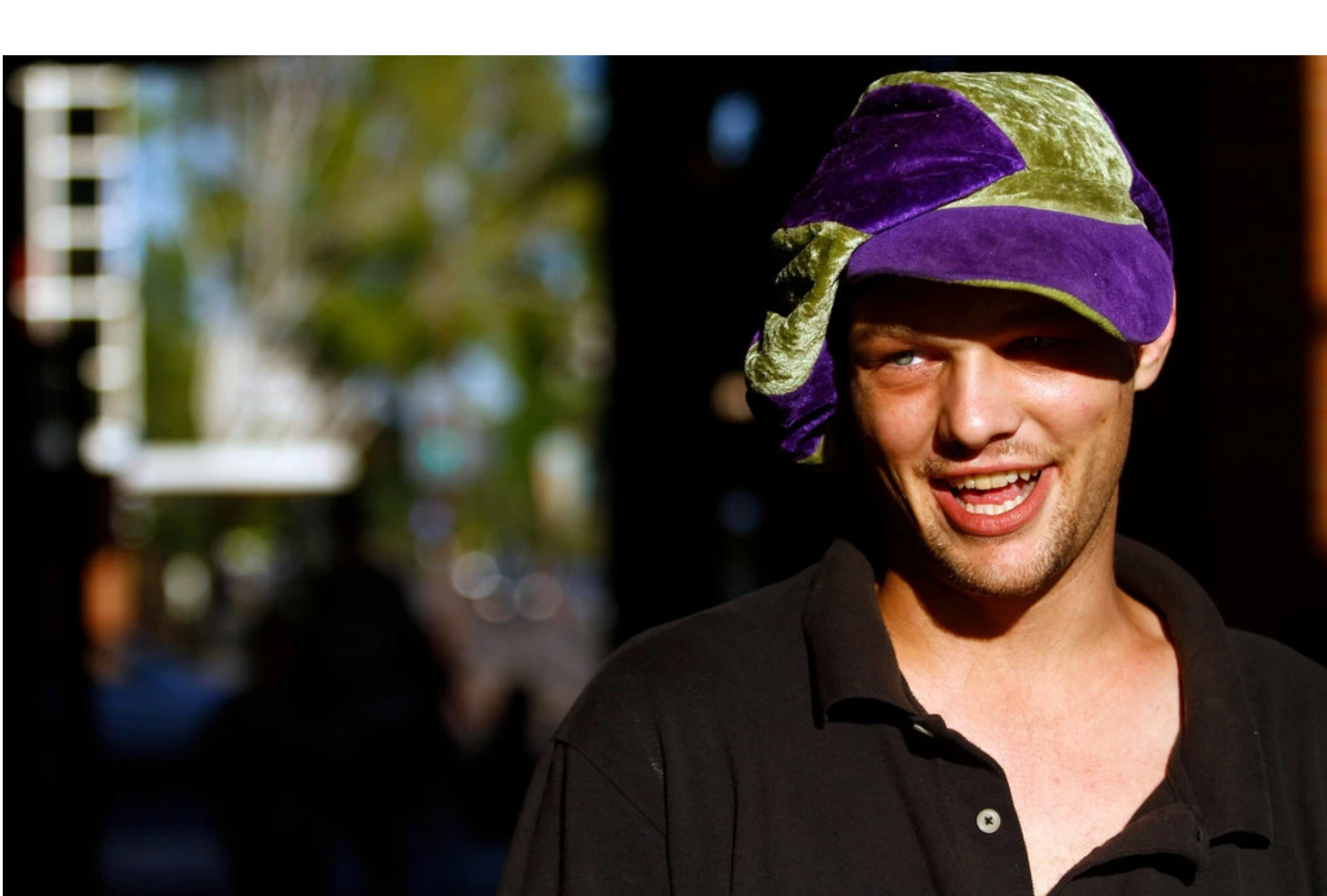
To make his point, Mr. May went by Starbucks, the gathering spot of the Mill Rats, as the frequenters of Mill Avenue are known.

“Are you fake, Benjamin?” he yelled out to Mr. Percy, who cried out “No,” with an expletive attached.

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“Are you fake, Thomas?” Mr. May shouted in the direction of Thomas Meadows, 27, a tarot card reader with less than a dollar to his name who is running for state treasurer. He similarly disagreed.

“Are you fake, Grandpa?” he said to Anthony Goshorn, 53, a candidate for the State Senate whose bushy white beard and paternal manner have earned him that nickname on the streets. “I’m real,” he replied.



Thomas Meadows is also running as a Green Party candidate in Arizona. Joshua Lott for The New York Times

Gathered around was a motley crew of people who were down on their luck, including a one-armed pregnant woman named Roxie whom Mr. May befriended sometime back and who introduced him to the rest.

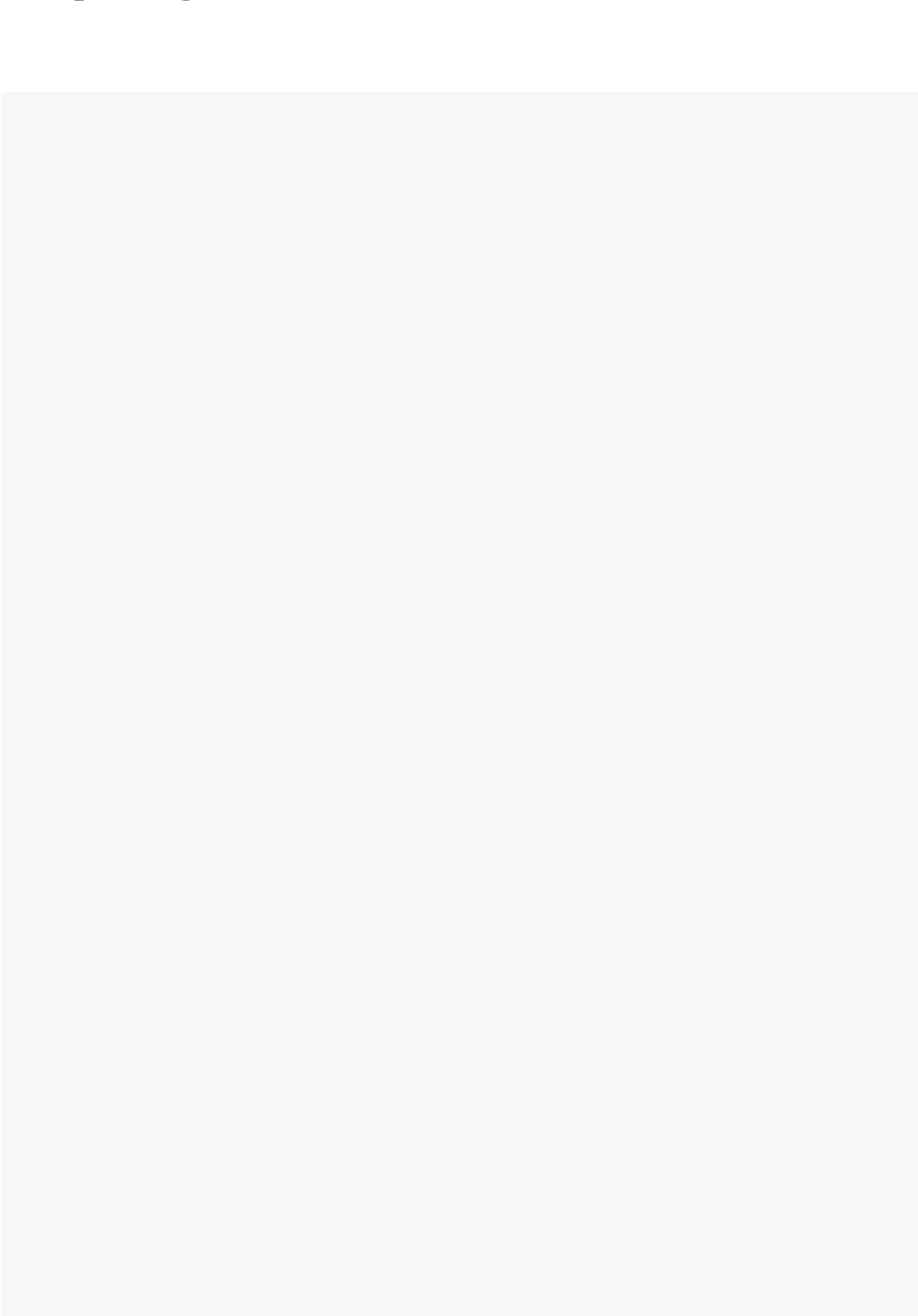
The Democratic Party is fuming over Mr. May’s tactics and those of at least two other Republicans who helped recruit candidates to the Green Party, which does not have the resources to put candidates on ballots around the state and thus creates the opportunity for write-in contenders like the Mill Rats to easily win primaries and get their names on the ballot for November. Complaints about spurious candidates have cropped up often before, though never involving an entire roster of candidates drawn from a group of street people.

“It’s unbelievable. It’s not right. It’s deceitful,” said Jackie Thrasher, a former Democratic legislator in northwest Phoenix who lost re-election in 2008 after a Green Party candidate with possible links to the Republicans joined the race. “If these candidates were interested in the democratic process, they should connect with the party they are interested in. What’s happening here just doesn’t wash. It doesn’t pass the smell test.”

Arizona, where Democrats, Republicans and independents each represent about a third of the populace, is known for its political hardball. Challenging nominating petitions is common. Election-related lawsuits are filed with regularity. This is not the first election in which a party has accused another of putting forth candidates to hoodwink voters.

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Besides the Mill Rat candidates, the Democrats smell a rat in other races, including one in which a roommate of a Republican legislator’s daughter ran as a Green Party candidate in a competitive contest for the State Senate. They cite a variety of state and federal election laws that the Republicans may have violated in putting forward “sham” candidates for the Green Party.



Anthony Goshorn is running as a Green Party candidate in Arizona. Democrats say all three candidates were recruited by a Republican in an effort to split the Democratic vote. Joshua Lott for The New York Times

The view, though, is different along Mill Avenue, where the first-time candidates appear to have been emboldened by the exercise, as Mr. Percy’s street corner campaign speech last Thursday night attests. Dressed up spiffily, he described himself as the illegitimate son of a stripper who had had run-ins with the law and a tough childhood but who had pulled his life together.

“I’ve been homeless,” he said, his eyes darting back and forth. “I got a place. Anyone can do it. We’re all good enough.”

There was nodding all around, more than when he went into his pitch to solve the budget deficit through the installation of solar panels. As Mr. Percy went on, Mr. May whispered “focus, focus, focus” into his ear to get him back on track and help prepare him for a debate in early October, which will be televised across the state.

Reading tarot cards has taught Mr. Meadows, who is known for his purple and green jester hat, to talk a good game. “This is not the land of the free,” he told the loungers on the sidewalk, pitching himself for treasurer. “It’s the land of what’s for sale.”

Grandpa, widely known in the area through the pedicab he drives for hire, is against higher taxes and for God in the classroom. The other night, he was supposed to debate his Democratic and Republican rivals in the race but after seeing only the Democrat on stage, he decided to watch from the back. “I got a bad vibe,” he said.

Mr. May, who served as a Republican legislator from 1998 to 2002, said, “Even if I wanted to control these guys, they’re uncontrollable.”

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