

# **The Perot Campaigns in Theoretical Perspective**

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**T**he recent presidential campaigns of H. Ross Perot, and the subsequent events surrounding Perot's Reform Party, have posed political scientists with a fascinating set of intellectual issues. In 1992, nearly one vote in five in the presidential election was cast for Perot, making his showing the strongest for a candidate from outside the two party system since 1912. Four years later, Perot's support was cut nearly in half, but he was still able to attract about 9 percent of the popular vote for president. Moreover, the Reform Party (the vehicle for Perot's candidacy in 1996) appears to have an enduring role in contemporary American politics. In 1998, Reform candidate Jesse "The Body" Ventura (a former professional wrestler) was elected governor of Minnesota, and has since become a highly visible player in Reform Party politics. Further, the Reform Party presidential nomination for the 2000 election has become the object of vigorous competition. As I write this in the autumn of 1999, both former Republican presidential contender Pat Buchanan and financier Donald Trump are publicly considering seeking the Reform Party nomination. Thus, unlike other third party movements in the twentieth century (Rosenstone et al. 1996), the Perot movement, institutionalized in the Reform Party, may well survive the political viability of its original candidate. Thus, several years after the fact, political scientists and political pundits alike have not arrived at satisfactory accounts of the Perot phenomenon, nor is there an appreciation of the long-term potential of the movement Ross Perot appears to have put into motion.

This volume is intended to help explain Perot's meteoric rise and precipitous decline in contemporary American electoral politics, as well as the apparent

persistence of the Reform movement into the twenty-first century. Perot's unusual success, and indeed, the very existence of Perot campaigns for the presidency, is difficult to explain. Almost uniquely among Western democratic systems, the United States is highly inhospitable to political challenges by movements that originate from outside the two-party system. The purpose of this introductory chapter is to review some of the formidable obstacles to American third-party movements, and to attempt preliminary explanations for Perot's ability to overcome some (but not all) of these barriers.

## Institutional Barriers

Among the most well-known and well-established generalizations in the social sciences is "Duverger's Law," which states that two party systems are likely to develop in polities that use a single-member district, plurality system, such as that found in the United States (Duverger 1963). Most political offices in the United States are contested under plurality rules, in which the candidate receiving the largest share of the popular vote is declared elected, even if that share falls below a majority (50 percent).

It is not difficult to see why such an electoral system discourages third party candidates. Presumably, a voter who is contemplating a vote for a candidate from outside the two party system is likely to have a preference between the major party candidates. As the chapters by Simmons and Simmons, Koch, and Mayer and Wilcox show, Perot drew votes from both Democratic and Republican presidential candidates in 1992 and 1996. A voter whose first choice for president was Ross Perot, but who preferred George Bush (in 1992) or Bob Dole (in 1996) to Bill Clinton, was posed with something of a strategic dilemma: Does one cast a vote for her first choice (Perot), if that vote would advantage this voter's last choice (Clinton)? Would it not make more sense to vote for the Republican candidate, in an effort to deny the presidency to Bill Clinton? This dilemma, often termed the "wasted vote" thesis, has been an extremely formidable obstacle to minor party and independent candidates for most of American history.

The Electoral College, of course, magnifies the disadvantage under which third parties must compete. Under the Electoral College system, a successful candidate for president must garner a majority of the electoral votes (currently 270 of a possible 538). While, in principle, such a majority system might provide a minor party candidate with an opportunity to create an Electoral College deadlock (thereby requiring the president to be selected by the House of Representatives), such leverage can only exist if the minor party candidate in question actually received electoral votes. In most states (Maine and Nebraska are the exceptions),

the state's electoral votes are assigned on a "winner take all" basis to the candidate receiving a plurality of the popular vote. Thus, in order to have any impact on the electoral vote, a minor party candidate typically must finish first in at least one state.

This sort of Electoral College deadlock has not occurred in the twentieth century. However, minor party candidates who have received electoral votes include Robert LaFollette (1924), Strom Thurmond (1948), and George Wallace (1968).<sup>1</sup> What these candidates have had in common is the fact that their popular support was geographically concentrated (in Wisconsin for LaFollette, and in the South for Thurmond and Wallace). Despite the fact that he ran better than any of these three former third-party candidates in 1992, and ran better than either LaFollette and Thurmond in 1996, Ross Perot received no electoral votes in either election. While Perot was able to finish second in several states in 1992, in no state did he obtain a popular vote plurality.

Thus, the practice of American elections tends to discourage both candidates and supporters of third parties quite strongly. Given the winner take all nature of elections in the United States, it is impossible for competitors from outside the two party system to make gains that are both gradual and tangible. While it is possible in principle for third parties to increase their popular support over a series of elections, the lack of tangible rewards (in terms of the election of public officials) has tended to reduce the lifespan of third party movements in the twentieth century.

Aside from the impact of electoral laws themselves, there are other institutional barriers to third party success in American elections. One of these is differential ballot access. The mechanics of conducting elections in the United States are generally regulated by state law, and no state or territory permits candidates to have unrestricted access to the ballot. Typically, most states impose some combination of petition signatures and filing fees, which vary substantially across states (Winger 1997; Dwyre and Kolodny 1997). While restrictions on ballot access have generally become less burdensome since the Wallace campaign of 1968, the existence of fifty-one (fifty states plus the District of Columbia) separate sets of regulations poses potential third party movements with a very high initial hurdle. Candidates and parties from outside the two party system must commit substantial resources to gaining admission to the electoral contest; something that is granted automatically to the Democratic and Republican parties.

The chapter in this volume by Martin and Spang, which describes the mobilization of the Virginia chapter of United We Stand, illustrates both the potential and limitations of such grass-roots movements. On the plus side, gaining ballot access did provide volunteers with an immediate, attainable goal in the early stages of the 1992 electoral cycle. This sort of activity may have created a psychological investment in the Perot campaigns, which could have sustained the commitment of Perot supporters during difficult times (such as Perot's untimely withdrawal in

July 1992). Conversely, movements such as United We Stand are unlikely to be popular with politically active citizens, who may have strong attachments to the existing parties. Third parties are often required to recruit from the ranks of people who are socially and politically isolated. The chapter by Gilbert, Johnson, Djupe, and Peterson on the impact of religion on the Perot campaigns suggests that third-party movements generally will lack the organizational support and political skills that often characterize active church members (Verba, Scholzman, and Brady 1995). This point can be generalized. The most fertile recruiting ground for third party supporters is likely to exist within those segments of the population that are not strongly politically or socially engaged. However, such people are also likely to lack the interest and skills necessary to participate in political activity.

Thus, the costs of admission to the electoral arena (in terms of time, money, and energy) are higher for the supporters of third party candidates than for those who support one of the two major parties. Moreover, these increased costs must often be borne by people whose ability to incur them is rather limited.

Attempts to “reform” campaign finance in the post-Watergate era have also limited the potential of some third-party movements. Under the regulations that have been in place since 1976, presidential candidates affiliated with the major parties are entitled to matching funds from the federal treasury during the primary season, and are entitled to federal financing during the general election. By contrast, the campaigns of John Anderson (in 1980) and Ross Perot in 1992 had to be financed privately (albeit under the same restrictions on fund raising imposed on major party candidates) with the possibility of reimbursement by the Federal Election Commission after the election. Further, the amount of such post hoc support for relatively successful third party candidates (e.g., those who qualify at all) is contingent on the level of electoral support such candidates receive. Again, third-party candidates typically have fewer resources with which to gain financial support, and must submit to more stringent requirements than those imposed on the major parties (Dwyre and Kolodny 1997).

Finally, certain federal regulations have often limited the media coverage available to third party candidates. Most conspicuously, third party candidates bear a substantial burden in order to be included in presidential debates. For the 2000 electoral cycle, for example, presidential candidates must achieve support of 15 percent or greater in one of the major national polls to be included in televised debates between presidential candidates (Clines 1999). Since these debates have become pivotal events in the conduct of general election campaigns since 1976, exclusion from debates can be a huge handicap for candidates from outside the two party system. A candidate such as Ross Perot in 1996 is faced with something of a Catch-22: In order to gain popular support, the candidate must participate in debates; in order to participate in televised debates, the candidate must demonstrate popular support.

Given these barriers to third party success, how did Ross Perot manage to fare as well as he did? It can easily be discerned that, despite the support of nearly one voter in five in 1992, Perot was unable to overcome in any way the bias imposed by the Electoral College. Despite a high expenditure of resources in two consecutive elections, Perot did not obtain a single electoral vote. Nevertheless, Perot was able to attract a very high level of support in 1992, and managed a fairly respectable showing in 1996. It has been argued (Rosenstone, Behr, and Lazarus 1996) that, in 1992, Perot was able to overcome many of the traditional obstacles to third-party success by using some of his substantial personal wealth. As the chapter by Kenneth Nordin illustrates, Perot was able to purchase large segments of television time for his “informercials” with his own personal fortune. Under the Supreme Court’s 1976 decision in *Buckley v. Valeo*, personal expenditures by candidates on their own behalf cannot constitutionally be limited. Perot was apparently able to parlay the investment of his own money into adroit use of “free” media (most notably, frequent appearances on the Larry King show), which in turn generated sufficient popular support to allow Perot to be included in the presidential debates. The preceding discussion has suggested that third party candidates and movements face formidable start-up costs in order to enter the electoral competition. Billionaire Perot was able to bear these costs more easily than most other third party candidates, and was thus able to attract a relatively large popular following.

In 1996, and perhaps in 2000 as well, Perot was able to take advantage of some of the institutional provisions that have traditionally benefited the major parties. While 1996 witnessed another extended struggle for ballot access for the newly formed Reform Party, Perot himself qualified for (and accepted) \$29 million in federal funds, based on his 1992 showing (Green and Binning 1997). Based on Perot’s more limited demonstration of support in 1996, the Reform Party candidate for president in 2000 will be eligible for approximately \$12.6 million in federal subsidies, which will be available during the campaign (Clines 1999). While this total will be dwarfed by the subsidies available to the Democratic and Republican candidates for president, the \$12.6 million may provide a basis for garnering the popular support necessary to gain entrance to televised presidential debates. Thus, in 2000, the Presidential nomination of the Reform Party may well be worth having, since Perot’s previous efforts have paid some of the start-up costs of third party activity in advance.

## Strategic Considerations

Despite the impressive limitations on third party activity in the United States, the presentation of alternatives to the two major parties is a frequently occurring

feature of American politics (Rosenstone et al 1996). Indeed, to suggest that Perot simply bought his way into contention in 1992 is to ignore features of the political environment in the late twentieth century that made Perot's approach particularly appealing to an important and politically consequential segment of the American electorate. While Perot's personal resources were perhaps *necessary* to his performance in the 1992 and 1996 elections, such resources would not have been sufficient under different circumstances. Thus, important questions for analysts of contemporary American electoral politics might be "Why Perot?" and "Why now?"

William Riker (1976) has proposed a dynamic theory, which can account for both the occurrence and decline of third parties in the United States. According to Anthony Downs (1956), parties in two party systems tend to converge toward the center of the left-right (or liberal-conservative continuum). As the major parties (such as the Republicans and the Democrats) come to resemble one another, voters on the extreme right or extreme left are likely to feel abandoned by the party closest to them, and increasingly indifferent to the differences between the two major parties. Thus, voters and candidates might well engage in a rational "future-oriented" strategy, in which votes in a present election are "wasted," in order to bring one or both parties closer to the optimal position on the extremes. As one of the major parties adapts to the challenge posed by the third party, by moving closer to the third party's positions, the rationale for the existence of the third party becomes weaker, and fewer voters are likely to be indifferent to the difference between the two major parties. Thus, in subsequent elections, the third party is increasingly unlikely to attract electoral support, even as its issue positions are adopted to some extent by the major parties.

At first glance, Riker's theory seems unlikely to apply to the Perot movement, since many accounts (including the Mayer and Wilcox piece in this volume) have suggested that Perot voters were "zealots of the center," who rejected the more strident issue positions of both major parties (see especially Miller and Shanks 1996). However, it does seem possible that, in the context of the 1992 election, it is the center of the liberal-conservative continuum that has been vacated by the major parties. Downsian analysis suggests that the logic of two party competition mandates that parties interested in electoral success will converge toward the center of the political spectrum. However, if the ideological movement of the Democrats and Republicans is constrained (perhaps by the internal dynamics of each party), the parties may leave vacant the center.

A recent analysis by Shafer and Claggett (1995) suggests that this is precisely what has happened in recent American politics. Schafer and Claggett have argued that public opinion in the United States is characterized by "two majorities": a conservative majority on "cultural/moral issues" involving personal morality and foreign affairs, and a liberal majority on issues pertaining to matters of economics.

The analysis further suggests that the former set of issues provide a context in which Republicans are likely to prevail, while Democrats have an advantage when the agenda concerns economic issues. However, both parties are, in a Downsian sense, acting irrationally in two distinct ways. In the first instance, each party in the late twentieth century has chosen to respond to internal constituencies that advantage the competition. Thus, the Republican Party has emphasized its economic conservatism, despite the fact that this set of issues tends to favor Democrats. Conversely, Democratic candidates have tended to focus on issues of personal morality (such as gay rights, feminism, and civil liberties for unpopular expression) even though these issues tend to advantage Republicans. For reasons that have yet to be explained adequately, each party has tended to compete in the opposition's ballpark. Secondly, Shafer and Claggett argue that each party has wasted its potential majority, by taking more extreme positions than the majority will bear. Thus, the commitment of some Democratic candidates to "hard" versions of affirmative action and income redistribution has alienated the moderate economic liberalism of many former supporters (e.g., "Reagan Democrats"), while the stridency of some Republican candidates on issues such as abortion and gay rights has prevented the mobilization of many potential supporters (Wilcox 1992; Jelen 1991).

It is not entirely clear why political candidates in contemporary American politics behave "irrationally" in this narrow Downsian sense. Some analysts have suggested that party "reforms" begun after 1968 have made political parties more responsive to relatively extreme activists (Crotty and Jackson 1985; Ladd 1978; Lengle 1981; and Polsby 1983), but recent research (Wilcox 1995; Norrander 1989) has shown that primary electorates are no more extreme than general election voters. What does seem clear is that candidates of both major parties, whether as the result of conviction or miscalculation, have frequently acted in a manner that does not permit them to maximize their share of the vote.

If elites in the major parties regard themselves to some extent as captives of their extremist wings, it may follow that the "vital center" has been the area of the political spectrum that has been vacated. Analyses of the issue positions of Perot voters have shown that they are generally more liberal than those who supported Bush or Dole, and more conservative than those who supported Clinton, in 1992 and 1996. Moreover, Perot may be regarded as an aggressive centrist in other respects as well. As the essays in this volume by Nordin and by Martin and Spang make clear, two of Perot's major issue positions were opposition to the federal deficit and support for term limits. Moreover, Perot's "can-do" approach suggested that problems in U.S. politics are not about ends but means. For example, Perot's promise to "get under the hood" and fix the economy suggests that there exists general agreement on what "fixing the economy" might mean. Perot thus campaigned in part against the *idea* of partisanship, and indeed, against the idea that politics is a profession.

Seen in this light, Perot's campaign thus may fit Riker's account rather nicely. Perot, as do most relatively successful third party candidates, gained a measure of electoral support by occupying a portion of the political spectrum not held by the major parties. Paradoxically, the vacant space in U.S. politics may have been in the center.

## Was Perot Successful?

Traditionally, third parties in the United States are rarely "successful" in the traditional sense of winning elections. Duverger's Law suggests that it is highly unlikely that the United States will ever sustain a stable multiparty system, and, in only one instance in American history—the ascendancy of the Republican Party in 1860—has a minor party succeeded in displacing one of the two major parties in the electoral system. Rather, the success or failure of third parties has generally been assessed in terms of their agenda-setting function (Rosenstone, Behr, and Lazarus 1996). That is, minor parties in the United States have often raised issues ignored by the two major parties, and the positions initially taken by minor parties on these issues are occasionally adopted by one or both of the major parties.

Given this policy-based criterion, how has the Perot movement fared? As the next chapter by Kenneth Nordin shows, Perot based his candidacies on three major themes: the need to reduce the federal budget deficit, reform of the political process itself, and the protection of American jobs from foreign competition. Specifically, the need for political reform was manifested in the term limits movement, which was endorsed by Perot, and an attack on NAFTA (the North American Free Trade Agreement) was the most visible aspect of Perot's economic nationalism.

In 1992, Perot characterized the federal budget deficit as being comparable to "a crazy old aunt in the attic," which neither party cared to discuss. By the end of the decade, both parties had endorsed plans to reduce the budget deficit, and, by 1998, the Federal Government was believed to be operating at a surplus. The Republican Party (the majority party in Congress since 1994) passed a series of budget reduction measures, and the Clinton administration has taken credit for a long period of economic prosperity which increased government revenues and lowered certain public expenditures. As this is being written in the final year of the Clinton administration, a major issue in public debate is the disposition of the budget surplus. Should government revenues that exceed expenditures be applied to the national debt, or does the surplus provide an opportunity for a major cut in federal taxes? The nature of the debate on a surplus in the federal budget suggests that both parties have responded to Perot's focus on the deficit as an important



problem. For voters who placed a high priority on deficit reduction in 1992 and 1996, a vote cast for H. Ross Perot was as influential a vote as has ever been cast in an American election. Rather than being “wasted,” as Duverger’s Law would suggest, votes cast for Perot in 1992 and 1996 had a profound effect on the direction of American politics, and, ultimately, on policies adopted by both major parties.

The record on political reform generally, and on the specific issue of term limits, has been mixed. The idea that the number of terms to which public officials (particularly members of Congress) should be limited has come to symbolize opposition to the existence of a supposed “political class” of nearly permanent, electorally secure legislators. Such a class has been regarded as “out of touch” with the concerns of ordinary citizens, and Perot was a proponent of efforts to replace such entrenched officials with frequently changing “citizen legislators.” Limiting an individual representative or senator’s term to two or three terms is an idea that has gained widespread support toward this goal.

A promise to consider the issue of term limits was an explicit item on the GOP’s “Contract With America,” a statement of principles produced by Congressional Republicans for the 1994 off-year elections. The question was quite prominent as a campaign issue in the 1994 elections, and several long-term members of Congress (including House Speaker Thomas Foley) were defeated in part because of their opposition to formal term limits. Thus, proponents of term limits were quite successful in placing the issue on the public agenda, and it seems likely that Perot’s high level of public support in 1992 was instrumental in achieving a high level of visibility for this issue.

However, the movement to limit the terms of elected legislators has, to date, been unsuccessful. Despite several attempts by several Republicans in the House of Representatives to enact legal term limits, measures that would mandate such limits have never been passed by either house of Congress. Moreover, several members of the House “Class of ’94,” who had promised to limit the number of terms for which they would run voluntarily have begun to reconsider their positions. Apparently, the experience of serving in the House of Representatives has introduced some recently elected members to the advantages of seniority and continuity of leadership.

Finally, Perot’s efforts to protect American jobs through protectionist policies has not been particularly successful. As noted in the chapter by Kenneth Nordin, Perot debated Vice President Al Gore on the question of NAFTA in November 1993 on the *Larry King Live* show. Despite Perot’s history and experience in using the medium of television, as well as his familiarity with the particular format of the King program, Perot was considered to have “lost” the NAFTA debate to Gore. Subsequently, NAFTA was ratified by the United States Senate, and the general issue of protectionism has generally disappeared from the public agenda of American politics. As this is written in the fall of 1999, it is perhaps noteworthy

that no candidate for the presidential nomination of either major party has taken a position against free trade. The decision of House minority leader Richard Gephardt (a long time supporter of protective tariffs) not to seek the Democratic presidential nomination in 2000 meant that there would be no Democratic candidate for president not committed to the importance of free trade. Perennial Republican candidate and economic nationalist Pat Buchanan is, at this writing, considering leaving the Republican Party to seek the presidential nomination of the Reform Party. If the analysis presented in this volume by Simmons and Simmons is substantially correct, there may well be a constituency for such a message, which will apparently be unrepresented by either major party in 2000. While Buchanan's conservatism on social issues may not be attractive to many potential supporters of the Reform Party, the fact that the major parties appear to have left the issue of economic nationalism to the Reform candidate may provide a basis of support for a Buchanan candidacy.<sup>2</sup>

Thus, the consequences of the Perot candidacies for public policy appear substantial, but limited. While the major parties have responded promptly and profoundly to Perot's treatment of the issue of the budget deficit, the same cannot be said of the issues of political reform or economic nationalism.

## Plan of the Book

This volume had its origins at a panel on "Third-Party Movements in American Politics," held at the annual meeting of the Midwest Political Science Association in Chicago in April of 1994. Versions of four of the papers included in this collection (those by Martin and Spang, Koch, Simmons and Simmons, and Gilbert et al.) were initially presented at that meeting. The idea of an edited volume emerged at a Dutch Treat lunch which immediately followed the panel session. As the project evolved (surviving a long delay during which the editor moved from suburban Chicago to Las Vegas), and as both Ross Perot and the Reform Party added to their respective histories, chapters were revised and added to describe and explain more recent developments. As this is being written, the Reform Party is being considered by several potential presidential candidates as a vehicle for articulating issue positions that may not be receiving much attention from the Democratic and Republican parties. The existence and persistence of the movement begun by Ross Perot in 1992 provides the rationale for this collection of studies.

The essays that comprise this volume provide sophisticated analyses of the Perot movement in 1992 and 1996, and may provide a basis for evaluating the potential of the Perot movement in the immediate future. The first two pieces deal

with the Perot phenomenon at the elite level. Kenneth Nordin suggests that, to a large extent, Perot's 1992 success can be attributed to an adroit understanding of the medium of television, and of the sorts of themes likely to succeed in that arena. Perot's somewhat weaker performance is perhaps attributable to a loss of control over "the story," and reduced access to the electronic media. The chapter by Martin and Spang shows that the "volunteers" (an important practical and rhetorical device in the Perot movement) exhibited high levels of "social capital" (Putnam 1995), without strong political commitments. Martin and Spang remind us of a lesson originally taught by Alexis de Tocqueville (1945), in which he emphasized the important of "voluntary associations" in limiting the tyranny of the majority. The existence of a large number of politically skilled people without strong political commitments constituted an important "slack" resource on which Ross Perot was able to draw (Dahl 1961).

The next four chapters concern the nature of support received by Ross Perot on the part of the mass public. Most analysts (see Asher 1995) have not been able to discern major differences between Perot voters and supporters of other candidates. Simmons and Simmons show that Perot drew disproportionate support from a constituency inhabiting a particular economic situation, with a coherent set of grievances. Jeffrey Koch builds on this finding, by showing that, to a large extent, Perot's leadership was instrumental in creating the sense of grievance that he cultivated among his supporters, which in turn may have had important consequences for the historic Congressional elections of 1994. Gilbert, Johnson, Peterson, and Djupe show that Perot drew much of his support from religiously uncommitted (and perhaps socially marginal) citizens. The Gilbert et al. piece raises more general questions about the roles of social integration and social capital in the dynamics of third party support at the mass level. Wilcox and Mayer suggest that the decline in Perot's support between 1992 and 1996 was uniform across virtually all social strata, which in turn suggests that the roots of Perot's decline cannot be attributed to simple changes in individual attitudes or behavior.

A final chapter by Gilbert and Peterson compares the sources of Perot support in Minnesota with that gained by Gov. Jesse Ventura in 1998. The continuities and discontinuities between the two candidates in a state with a strong independent tradition suggest that there may be substantial limits to the long-term national viability of the Reform Party.

We hope that the essays in this volume will contribute to a deeper understanding of the Perot phenomenon, and indeed, to the dynamics of American electoral politics generally. The Perot campaigns have provided an unusual opportunity to observe change in American politics at the levels of popular culture, elite-level activism, and public opinion. The studies that follow constitute an attempt to exploit this intellectual opportunity.

## Notes

1. This discussion, of course, excludes the election of 1912, in which the Republican candidate (William Taft) was an incumbent president, and the “Bull Moose” candidate (Theodore Roosevelt) was a former GOP president. Both candidates received electoral votes, but the split in the Republican ranks made Woodrow Wilson’s relatively narrow popular vote victory an Electoral College landslide.

2. Preliminary analysis of selected exit polls for the 1996 Republican primaries suggests that Buchanan was much more successful in attracting the votes of social conservatives than economic nationalists. Indeed, the strongest predictor of Buchanan support in 1996 was the voters’ attitude toward abortion, rather than the voters’ position on issues of free trade or immigration. See Morrison 1999.

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