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An Outsider's Campaign:
Ross Perot's Impact on Presidential Politics

By Kevin Prendergast '10



“Over the past two decades, presidential politics has become a blood sport reserved for the paid professionals; there is no room for amateurs anymore, no storefront headquarters staffed with volunteers, no buttons, no bumper stickers. Into this cynical world of negative TV spots and staged sound bites, Perot marched in to announce, in effect, ‘This is America. We don’t have to take their candidates, we can nominate our own.’ What Perot has tapped is the spirit of volunteerism that so entranced Tocqueville 150 years ago, the this-is-a-new-land-and-we-can-do-anything ethos that once defined the national character.”¹ – *Time Magazine* (25 May 1992)

In the 1992 presidential election, Henry Ross Perot amassed the second highest percentage of the national popular vote by a third-party candidate in the twentieth century, second only to Theodore Roosevelt’s Progressive Party campaign in 1912. His 19,742,267 votes amounted to roughly 18.9 percent of the 104 million votes cast in the presidential election that year.² To build up a base of almost twenty million voters would have been an extraordinary accomplishment for any politician, let alone an inexperienced Texas businessman such as Perot. He decided, in February 1992, to run for president as an independent candidate, funding his entire campaign with his own money. Yet, on November 3, 1992, a little more than eight months after initially announcing his intention to campaign for the presidency, Perot made history as one of the most successful candidates in history. Reflecting upon Perot’s place in history, political scientist, Jeffrey Koch, writes, “H. Ross Perot’s 1992 presidential candidacy represents one of the most serious third party challenges in American political history.”³ Perot’s campaign was one that appealed to disillusioned voters, who were tired of the same old faces in Washington – those corrupt, wasteful, and untrustworthy politicians.⁴ However, during the course of

¹ Priscilla Painton and Walter Shapiro, “He’s Ready, But is America Ready for President Perot?” *Time Magazine*, May 25, 1992, 30.

² Eric M. Appleman, “Electoral Vote Maps for 1992 and 1996,” The George Washington University – Democracy in Action, <http://www.gwu.edu/~action/maps9296.html>.

³ Jeffrey Koch, “The Perot Candidacy and Attitudes toward Government and Politics” *Political Research Quarterly* Vol. 51, No. 1 (March 1998), 141.

⁴ *Ibid*, 145.

running his eight month campaign, Ross Perot would come to make a lasting, positive impact on presidential politics.

It was the perfect time for a reform-minded candidate, such as Perot, to enter the political landscape. After the successful expulsion of Iraqi forces from Kuwait in the Gulf War in 1991, President George H.W. Bush's approval rating went into freefall. It slipped to an abysmal 29 percent in July and August 1992.⁵ So, the stage was set for an outsider to have a good chance at the presidency, with such an unpopular president looking for a second term. Meanwhile, the country was facing a severe recession, with the average annual unemployment rate in 1992 at 7.5 percent, the highest such rate since 1983.⁶ Also, the U.S. federal budget deficit for fiscal year 1992 reached an all-time high of \$290.3 billion.⁷ The Bush administration had incurred a substantial amount of public debt and had failed to avert a severe recession. Thus, Americans were losing their jobs, losing their money, and, most importantly, losing their faith in government. As political scientist Howard J. Gold writes, "Perot was able to capitalize on a widespread frustration with the status quo and with government in particular."⁸ Because Perot was an incredibly successful businessman, it was thought that he was the right man to help bring some economic stability to the country. "And, as much of the post-election analysis states, the 1992 election was fought within the context of an economy perceived to be in decline."⁹

When Ross Perot "unofficially" entered the presidential race on February 20, 1992, he told CNN's *Larry King Live* audience, "No. 1, I will not run as either a Democrat or Republican, because I will not sell out to anybody but to the American people, and I will sell out to them. No. 2, if...you, the people, are that serious, you register me in 50 states, and if you're not willing to organize and do that -- then this is all just talk".¹⁰ Thus, Perot issued a challenge to all of his potential supporters to put his name on the ballot in every state in an attempt to make his campaign legitimate and meaningful, or he would not run for president. Almost instantly, thousands of Ross Perot supporters from all across the country set up organizing committees to attempt to get Perot's name on each state's ballot. The campaign instantly received an unprecedented surge in attention, particularly for a third party candidate. For instance, by early June 1992, Perot had an eight percentage point lead over incumbent president, George H.W. Bush, and a fourteen percentage point lead over Democratic Party nominee, Bill Clinton, in the nationwide Gallup Poll. According to *The New York Times*, which broke the story, "No previous independent or third party candidate has ever placed second, much less first, in nearly six decades of Gallup's nationwide polling for President".¹¹ Thus, in less than four months of campaigning, Ross Perot had accumulated the type of support that

⁵ Frank Newport, "Bush Job Approval at 28%, Lowest of His Administration," Gallup, Inc., <http://www.gallup.com/poll/106426/Bush-Job-Approval-28-Lowest-Administration.aspx>.

⁶ Bureau of Labor Statistics, "Where Can I Find the Unemployment Rate for Previous Years," U.S. Department of Labor – Bureau of Labor Statistics, http://www.bls.gov/cps/prev_yrs.htm.

⁷ U.S. Office of Management and Budget, "Budget of the United States Government: Fiscal Year 2009 – Historical Tables," Executive Office of the President of the United States, <http://www.gpoaccess.gov/usbudget/fy09/pdf/hist.pdf>.

⁸ Howard J. Gold, "Third Party Voting in Presidential Elections: A Study of Perot, Anderson, and Wallace" *Political Research Quarterly* Vol. 48, No. 4 (Dec. 1995), 755.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 762.

¹⁰ Jan Hoffman, "TELEVISION: Larry King, Kingmaker to the Polls" *The New York Times*, June 28, 1992.

¹¹ The New York Times Staff, "The 1992 CAMPAIGN: On the Trail, Poll Gives Perot a Clear Lead" *The New York Times*, June 11, 1992.

could win him the election in November. However, Perot was not a typical candidate and the remaining five months would be anything but politics as usual.

In July 1992, Ross Perot would come to change the landscape of the campaign yet again. However, it was not the type of change that he or his supporters wanted. On July 16, 1992, Ross Perot decided to end his presidential candidacy. He did so extremely abruptly, citing the resurgence of the Democratic Party and his increasingly improbable chance at winning the November election as his reasons why he decided to end his seemingly successful campaign. His most important concern was that "he feared that a three-way contest would have to be decided in January by the House of Representatives, a prospect he called disruptive to the country"¹². There were some legitimate grounds to this notion that none of the candidates would be able to attain the majority of the electorate necessary to win. And, if this happened and the election went to the U.S. House of Representatives, Perot would surely lose. For, in other words, "even if a third-party or independent candidate did become eligible for election by the House, a legislative body dominated by Democrats and Republicans would be unlikely to turn to an independent."¹³ Perot supporters were shocked, as were his two main opponents. However, Perot did what he felt was the proper thing to do, something that put the country's best interests before his own personal ambitions. In Perot's own words, "People can say anything they want to say...I am trying to do what's right for my country. Now that probably makes me odd in your eyes, but that's what I'm trying to do"¹⁴. Despite the fact that Perot did what he felt was right, this withdrawal from the campaign permanently damaged his credibility as a legitimate candidate for the office of the presidency, both in 1992 and in his subsequent campaign in 1996. According to political analyst Eleanor Clift, it is only natural, in this situation, to wonder "what might have been had he not acted so impetuously last July. Only three weeks before he withdrew, some polls showed him leading in a three-way race"¹⁵. Although Perot decided to re-enter the race on October 1, 1992, just thirty three days before Election Day, his chances at the presidency had decreased dramatically. However, his opportunity to incite some changes in presidential politics and the country were far from over.

Throughout the course of Perot's run at the presidency, he chose to campaign his own way. He refused to subscribe to politics as usual, because that was the very institution which he was battling so fervently. There were many ways in which Perot's campaign was ground-breaking, because of his unique way of thinking and leading his campaign. Also, there were a number of precedents which he set and ideas which he brought to the forefront of political issues. Ross Perot felt that it was the people who owned this country, not politicians. He made the call to "go back to what this country is supposed to be about. The voters own this country"¹⁶. Thus, in keeping with this motto,

¹² Steven A. Holmes, "AT THE GRASS ROOTS – ROSS PEROT: Perot Says Democratic Surge Reduced Prospect" *The New York Times*, July 17, 1992.

¹³ Paul R. Abramson, John H. Aldrich, Phil Paolino, David W. Rohde, "Third-Party and Independent Candidates in American Politics: Wallace, Anderson, and Perot" *Political Science Quarterly* Vol. 110, No. 3 (Autumn 1995), 352.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ Eleanor Clift, "Perot: Pulling the Race Out of the Mud" *Newsweek*, October 26, 1992.

¹⁶ "Newsmaker: Ross Perot, September 24, 1996 Transcript," Online NewsHour Interview with Jim Lehrer – Public Broadcasting Service, http://www.pbs.org/newshour/bb/election/september96/perot_sues_9-24.html.

Perot wanted to end the rhetoric and loftiness of political speech. He wanted to convey his ideas and message to the people clearly, rather than hide his true message behind negative advertisements and political attacks. Perot demonstrated that

“voters yearned for information on candidates without having to sift it through the traditional filter of the news media. His use of talk shows and the consistently high ratings of his 30-minute and hour long commercials indicated a voter preference for direct communication from the candidate, for substance over attacks or mawkish advertisements.”¹⁷

He used his now renowned thirty minute television advertisements to convey his ideas to the voters. Perot did his best to show what he thought was wrong with the system through charts, graphs, and other forms of statistical evidence. In his “infomercial” style format, Perot would bring his message across to the listener in a way that differed from that of all professional politicians of his time. It seems that there was something attractive about a candidate who would spend large amounts of time and money explaining his potential policies to all of those willing to listen, because Perot’s commercials often fared very well in their Nielsen television ratings.

It was during these commercials that Ross Perot would convey his distinct message of reform in government. Often, politicians will express a message of change, but few are willing to go as far as Perot was, in calling for and composing policy changes that would incite such massive, identifiable change in the way government is run. Perhaps the policy that he most wanted to see adopted was the balancing of the federal budget. Perot saw the need for a balanced federal budget, especially in the context of his time. The U.S. government had been operating in a budget deficit since 1969 and had not witnessed two consecutive budget surpluses since 1956 and 1957.¹⁸ Thus, Perot knew the potentially devastating ramifications of allowing severe long-term debt at the national level to occur. Throughout the course of his campaign, Perot vehemently advocated a balanced budget amendment to the U.S. Constitution. A balanced budget amendment bill was proposed to both the Senate and the House of Representatives in 1982, but the bill failed to attain the two-thirds majority in the House, so it faded into relative obscurity until Perot’s 1992 campaign.¹⁹ Although such an amendment has yet to be passed by Congress, Ross Perot’s call for a balanced budget was noticed by many in the federal government. After being elected president in 1992, Bill Clinton adopted this proposal and instituted the desire for a balanced budget into his policy-making. By 1998, Clinton finally achieved a federal budget surplus, the first in nearly thirty years.²⁰ Clinton would

¹⁷ Steven A. Holmes, “THE 1992 ELECTIONS: DISAPPOINTMENT – NEWS ANALYSIS An Eccentric, but No Joke; Perot’s Strong Showing Raises Questions On What Might Have Been, and Might Be” *The New York Times*, November 5, 1992.

¹⁸ U.S. Office of Management and Budget, “Budget of the United States Government: Fiscal Year 2009 – Historical Tables,” Executive Office of the President of the United States, <http://www.gpoaccess.gov/usbudget/fy09/pdf/hist.pdf>.

¹⁹ “S.J. Res. 1 – Balanced Budget Constitutional Amendment,” U.S. Senate Republican Policy Committee, <http://www.senate.gov/~rpc/releases/1997/v5.htm>.

²⁰ U.S. Office of Management and Budget, “Budget of the United States Government: Fiscal Year 2009 – Historical Tables,” Executive Office of the President of the United States, <http://www.gpoaccess.gov/usbudget/fy09/pdf/hist.pdf>.

subsequently achieve a federal budget surplus during the next three fiscal years. Therefore, although Perot never made it into the Oval Office, his influence did, through the policies which he advocated.

In promoting such tight money management at the federal level, Perot wanted government officials to act frugally and to not rely on special interests along the campaign trail. He modeled this ideal throughout his 1992 campaign. Perot, a life-long businessman, wanted to run the government much like an efficient business, without much of the wasteful pork barrel spending and corruption that plagued it for years. Also, when campaigning, as a result of the need for a vast amount of money to fund a campaign, many presidential candidates accept money from special interest groups, advocacy groups, and other influential people to enable them to run a successful campaign. However, Perot believed that this was unethical, because it created immense pressure on the candidate to cater to or to return the favor to these benefactors once elected to the office. Perot strongly supported campaign finance reform, which, although it is often mentioned by politicians today, remains an issue that politicians choose to avoid. Even in 2005, some thirteen years after his first presidential candidacy, Perot continues to speak out against the corruption in Washington, particularly against that along the campaign trail. Perot, as he did in 1992, continues to push forth "His central message--that Washington remains in thrall to "checkbox lobbyists" who buy favored treatment through campaign contributions and gifts to lawmakers [which] resonates with most Americans at a time when leaders of both parties are dragging their feet on political-reform legislation".²¹ Perot chose to spend \$63.5 million of his own fortune on his 1992 presidential campaign, rather than allow his campaign to be tainted by contributions from organizations with their own personal agendas at heart.²²

Perot's financing of his presidential campaign through his own personal fortune made a powerful impression upon many people. It was an appealing idea to think that a candidate would deny funds from those who did not have the country's best interests at heart and that such a third party candidate would not be using up monetary grants from the Federal Election Commission. The success of this former businessman in the 1992 election incited a number of similarly successful men to follow Perot's lead. Although there have always been wealthy, successful businessmen who have turned their attention from the corporate world to the political world in United States history, Perot sparked a new wave of such figures. Such men as Michael Bloomberg, the current Mayor of New York City, Jon Corzine, the current Governor of New Jersey, and Mitt Romney, the former Governor of Massachusetts, have all used their own personal assets in funding their respective campaigns. However, none of these three men have gone as far as Ross Perot as to run their campaigns as a reform-minded independent candidate. Perot "ran as an independent, engaged in highly unorthodox campaign tactics, refused federal subsidies, and spent over \$60 million of his own".²³ However, each of the three aligned themselves with one of the two major parties when running for their respective office. Nonetheless, Perot's influence in stimulating this rise in former businessmen turned politicians cannot be denied.

²¹ Dan Goodgame, "This Time, Perot Wants a Party" *Time Magazine*, February 17, 2005.

²² Globe Staff, "Romney Spent \$42.3M of Own Money" *The Boston Globe*, February 21, 2008.

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¹⁹ “S.J. Res. 1 – Balanced Budget Constitutional Amendment,” U.S. Senate Republican Policy Committee, <http://www.senate.gov/~rpc/releases/1997/v5.htm>.

²⁰ U.S. Office of Management and Budget, “Budget of the United States Government: Fiscal Year 2009 – Historical Tables,” Executive Office of the President of the United States, <http://www.gpoaccess.gov/usbudget/fy09/pdf/hist.pdf>.

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It is precisely this personal fortune which Perot used to finance his large-scale campaign that gave him instant credibility. He was able to lead a campaign that could rival that of the Democratic and Republican parties.

“To be sure, some of Mr. Perot's strength must be laid to his own formidable resources. Third-party or independent candidates of the past could not buy half-hours on all three networks as if they were campaign buttons, and they generally could not afford to subsidize the effort to get themselves on the ballot in all 50 states. Mr. Perot could not have done what he did without his own tens of millions, as he would be the first to acknowledge.”²⁴

It is this credibility which allowed Perot to fully participate in the presidential political process more than any third party candidate in quite a long time. In 1992, Ross Perot became the first and only third-party candidate to debate both major-party presidential nominees. The three men participated in three nationally-televised debates. It was an astonishing feat for Perot to be allowed to participate in the debates. No third-party candidate since Perot has been afforded this same opportunity to participate. This remarkable achievement is best put into perspective by Dr. Lenora Fulani, a political activist, who stated, “I was tickled pink [in 1992] to see Ross up there debating Clinton and Bush. Not only did he win the debates in terms of making the most sense, we *all* won because an independent was up there”.²⁵ Perot fared extremely well in the debates. Some political pundits even considered Perot the winner of the three debates. As a result of this strong third-party showing and potential threat to the two major parties, the Commission on Presidential Debates has increased the requirements for participation in presidential debates by third-party candidates since Perot's participation in 1992. However, Perot's involvement in the three debates during the 1992 campaign was ground-breaking and shows how successful Ross Perot's candidacy truly was.

Despite all of the immense strides that Ross Perot made throughout the campaign, his presidential hopes did not come to fruition. Although Perot earned nearly twenty million votes nationwide and more than five percent of the vote in all fifty states, he failed to receive any electoral votes. This has been a problem that has plagued third parties throughout United States history. The problem remains inherent in the system, as “the electoral rules in the United States create barriers that third parties and independent candidates have been unable to surmount”²⁶. However, this does not mean that Perot's influence was forgotten after Election Day passed. The two major parties realized the immense support that Perot had amassed among people from all walks of life. Thus, there was a calculated effort on the part of both the Republican and Democratic parties to adopt some of the policy measures which Perot had advocated so strongly. As both parties realized, it was imperative that they try to gain the votes of this very large portion

²⁴ Steven A. Holmes, “THE 1992 ELECTIONS: DISAPPOINTMENT – NEWS ANALYSIS An Eccentric, but No Joke; Perot's Strong Showing Raises Questions On What Might Have Been, and Might Be” *The New York Times*, November 5, 1992.

²⁵ Sidney Kraus, *Televised Presidential Debates and Public Policy*, 2nd ed. (Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, Inc. Publishers, 2000), 202.

²⁶ Paul R. Abramson, John H. Aldrich, Phil Paolino, David W. Rohde, “Third-Party and Independent Candidates in American Politics: Wallace, Anderson, and Perot” *Political Science Quarterly* Vol. 110, No. 3 (Autumn 1995), 349.

of the electorate. Better stated, "The larger the vote the third party receives, the greater the incentive one or both parties have to respond by trying to capture or recapture backers of the third-party movement"²⁷. By the mid-term elections of 1994, the Republicans had done a much better job in courting the Ross Perot supporters. "The effects on U.S. House races beginning in 1994 are plain. Without a strong Perot showing in 1992, it is unlikely that the Republicans would have gained the majority in the U.S. House in 1994."²⁸ Thus, the effects of Perot's 1992 presidential campaign could be seen for many years to come.

Perot would never receive the same support that he did in 1992. Although he would run again in 1996 as the Reform Party candidate, a party which he helped organize, he did not receive even close to the same amount of widespread support. He did end up receiving over eight million votes, which translates to about 8.5 percent of the national popular vote.²⁹ However, he did not have nearly as great of an impact as before. It is widely-recognized that most presidential candidates have only one chance to make their mark. That chance is magnified greatly for independent or third party candidates. For, as Richard Hofstadter put it: "Third parties are like bees; once they have stung, they die"³⁰. Still, the fact remains that Perot did make a positive, noticeable impact on presidential politics as a whole. He looked to make politics applicable to everyone. Perot attempted to make himself easy to understand, trying to simplify politics in his half-hour-long television ads. He looked to promote governmental reform, such as fiscal responsibility and a balanced federal budget. This private, successful businessman-turned-politician wanted to bring reform from an outsider, one of the people and his influence can be seen in many of the public officials who have followed that lead. Many of Perot's positive contributions can be encompassed in Perot's mantra, "Don't waste your vote on politics as usual"³¹. It is rare that a third party candidate has been able to reach the ears of so many interested members of the electorate. But, then again, none of these failed third party candidates found them in the circumstances in which Perot did. "Some experts say that it will be virtually impossible for a candidate to duplicate Mr. Perot's effort unless he has a personal fortune and finds the country once again in such a foul mood."³² Henry Ross Perot was able to incite some change that he saw necessary during a time of great distress in the country. Despite the fact that he never held the office which he so desperately sought, his ideas certainly made their way into the hallowed halls of that office. Thus, for that, he should be commended and his influence remembered for years to come.

²⁷ Walter J. Stone, Ronald B. Rapoport, "It's Perot Stupid! The Legacy of the 1992 Perot Movement in the Major-Party System, 1994-2000" *PS: Political Science and Politics* Vol. 34, No. 1 (March 2001), 51.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 56.

²⁹ "1996 POPULAR VOTE SUMMARY FOR ALL CANDIDATES LISTED ON AT LEAST ONE STATE BALLOT," Federal Election Commission, <http://www.fec.gov/pubrec/fe1996/summ.htm>.

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