

BEYOND THE BALLOT: STRUCTURAL BARRIERS TO THE
PRESIDENCY AND THE PERFORMANCE OF INDEPENDENT
AND MINOR PARTY CANDIDATES

by

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Third-party and independent presidential candidates are formally permitted to compete in American elections, yet they operate within an electoral system structured in ways that advantage the two major parties. Institutional rules governing ballot access, campaign finance, debate participation, and voter perceptions shape the conditions under which non-major-party candidates attempt to build viable campaigns. This study examines how these structural factors influenced candidate performance in the 1992 and 1996 presidential elections through a comparative case study of Ross Perot's two campaigns. Drawing on existing literature, Federal Election Commission data, polling data, and contemporaneous accounts, this research evaluates how ballot access, campaign finance, debate inclusion, and public perception operated across both election cycles. In 1992, Perot's personal wealth, media access, and debate participation enabled him to overcome many institutional barriers and secure 18.9% of the popular vote. By contrast, his exclusion from the 1996 presidential debates, spending constraints associated with public funding, and shifting political and economic conditions contributed to a decline to 8.4% of the popular vote. Ultimately, the findings suggest that while the institutional design of the American electoral system systematically constrains multiparty competition, third-party campaigns can overcome structural barriers under the right conditions of resources and timing, and that success may be measured not only by winning office but also by reshaping party coalitions and influencing the policy priorities of the two-party system.

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Introduction

Independent-identifying voters represent the largest political group of Americans compared to both Democrats and Republicans, yet the last independent candidate to be elected President of the United States was George Washington (Mount Vernon, 2025). The American electorate's seeming inability or unwillingness to elect a president outside of the two-party majority is worth raising questions. Without the ability to elect representatives who will reflect the will of the public, the United States' government cannot be a true representative democracy.

The United States is supposed to be a model of democratic openness and electoral fairness, yet the structure of its political system creates formidable obstacles for candidates outside the two major parties. While third-party and independent candidates are formally allowed to compete in presidential elections, the conditions under which they do so are shaped by structural barriers that severely limit their competitiveness.

Despite the numerous forbidding obstacles that face presidential candidates who identify outside of the two-party majority, a few have managed to gain significant traction in presidential elections. The 1992 presidential election witnessed the unprecedented success of an Independent presidential candidate. Ross Perot, an American businessman and billionaire, ran for president in 1992 and won nearly 19% of the popular vote. His second campaign in 1996 received significantly less support, yet, relative to other Independent candidates, a large number of voters still supported his campaign.

This thesis investigates how structural barriers influence the performance of independent and third-party presidential candidates by applying insights from the scholarly literature to real-world electoral campaigns. Instead of viewing their limited success as a failure of ideas or organization, this project will consider the broader institutional context that determines who gets

access to the ballot, public financing, national debates, and public legitimacy. By analyzing how these barriers functioned in the 1992 and 1996 presidential elections, this research will illustrate how supposedly open electoral competition is systematically constrained.

This research attempts to connect theoretical frameworks with concrete political outcomes. While scholars have long studied the structural disadvantages that third parties face, such as ballot access restrictions, unequal campaign financing, debate exclusion, and limited public recognition, fewer studies have traced how these barriers function in specific campaign settings. By applying these factors to the campaigns of independent and third party candidates in two presidential election cycles, this thesis demonstrates how theory manifests in practice and how formal inclusion in the electoral process does not guarantee meaningful competition. This project contributes to a more nuanced assessment of political competition in the U.S. and raises questions about whether electoral openness exists in form more than in function.

Literature Review

The American Electoral System

The United States' electoral system's design creates systemic disadvantages for third-party and independent candidates. The electoral system shapes voter behavior and determines the strategic opportunities available to political actors, entrenching two-party competition at the national and local levels. The use of single-member plurality voting, otherwise known as "first-past-the-post" or FPTP voting, in particular prohibits the success of independent and third-party candidates in the U.S. (Riker, 1982). Riker argues that FPTP elections naturally create a two-party system through the mechanism of strategic voting, where citizens are discouraged from supporting less viable third-party candidates to avoid "wasting" their vote. Riker draws on Duverger's Law to explain that this phenomenon is not merely a cultural practice. It is a mathematical and institutional consequence of the United States' electoral system.

Additionally, strategic coordination among voters and political actors plays a crucial role in shaping electoral outcomes. Cox (1997) demonstrates that plurality electoral systems motivate voters to desert weaker candidates and back stronger ones, reinforcing the two-party equilibrium. Cox also introduces the concept of "coordination failures," showing that when third parties do perform well, it often results from unusual conditions that temporarily disrupt strategic behavior.

Electoral system design significantly predicts the number of effective political parties across democracies internationally as well (Neto and Cox, 1997). Neto and Cox's comparative study confirmed that single-member district plurality systems similar to the United States consistently produce fewer viable parties compared to proportional representation systems. This pattern holds across a wide variety of national contexts, demonstrating that the United States' two-party dominance is an institutional feature reinforced by electoral rules.

U.S. Presidential Elections

This thesis examines elections in the United States at a national level because presidential elections offer the most analytically revealing setting for examining structural barriers that inhibit the success of third-party and independent candidates. Unlike congressional and gubernatorial elections, presidential contests require nationwide ballot access, attract extensive media attention, and operate using uniquely powerful institutional structures, including the Federal Election Commission (FEC) and the Commission on Presidential Debates (CPD). These national institutions generate an environment in which legal, financial, and organizational inequalities between major-party candidates and outsiders become most apparent.

Existing research demonstrates that presidential elections magnify both the mechanical and psychological effects of plurality rule as described by Duverger's law (Cox, 1997; Riker, 1982). Because the Electoral College requires a majority to win, voters experience heightened pressure to coordinate around two viable candidates (Abramson et al., 1992). This dynamic makes presidential elections a critical site for studying how institutional design sustains two-party dominance and suppresses independents and smaller parties. Additionally, presidential campaigns generate rich archival and financial data through mandatory FEC reporting. The availability of standardized national data makes presidential elections a uniquely valuable lens for identifying how structural barriers operate at scale.

Factors:

Ballot access

Ballot access laws are among the most substantial institutional barriers faced by third-party and independent presidential candidates. The United States lacks national ballot access standards; instead, candidates must navigate fifty-one different sets of state and territorial

requirements. Some argue that the modern proliferation of restrictive ballot access laws constitutes “collusion in restraint of democracy,” noting that major-party legislators have strong incentives to raise petition thresholds, impose early filing deadlines, and enforce complex verification procedures that disproportionately burden nonmajor candidates (Hall, 2005). The effect is cumulative: although each regulation may appear administratively neutral, together they create what Hall calls “death by a thousand signatures”.

Empirical studies demonstrate that these restrictions directly suppress third-party participation. High signature requirements have been found to correlate with lower rates of minor-party ballot qualification (Burden, 2007). Additionally, uneven state-level rules forcibly and significantly increase the financial and organizational burden of mounting a national campaign (Streb, 2016). Furthermore, historical evidence supports these findings: in several Southern states, restrictive laws enacted during the mid-twentieth century effectively eliminated independent congressional candidacies for decades (Hall, 2005). As Thornton (2014) notes in his retrospective on the Libertarian Party, both major parties have “almost completely agreed on keeping third parties off the ballot by making the number of signatures prohibitively high”. Ballot access, therefore, functions not only as an administrative hurdle but also as a mechanism of political exclusion, weaponized by actors who benefit from this exclusivity.

Campaign financing and resources

Campaign financing is a structural barrier that is both legally codified and self-reinforcing. Public financing is administered through the FEC, and is supposedly designed to equalize opportunities among presidential candidates; yet, in practice, it still advantages major-party nominees. The federal matching funds program requires candidates to raise more than \$5,000 in matchable contributions from at least 20 states, with only the first \$250 of each

individual contribution counting toward the threshold (FEC 1992; FEC 1996). This rule disproportionately favors candidates with established national networks, which third-party and independent campaigns typically lack.

Without comparable financial resources, third-party candidates face difficulties running viable national campaigns and meeting basic logistical requirements, such as obtaining ballot access, hiring staff, and achieving media visibility. Financial constraints ultimately exacerbate all other barriers, making it even more difficult for third-party and independent candidates to achieve successful campaigns.

Debate Participation Rules and Access

Debate participation is a consequential barrier to third-party and independent presidential success. The Commission on Presidential Debates (CPD), controlled jointly by Democratic and Republican Party leaders, sets polling thresholds for debate inclusion that independent candidates rarely achieve without the visibility that the debates themselves provide. This circular logic of needing debate exposure to raise polling numbers but needing high polling numbers to qualify for the debates creates a self-reinforcing exclusionary system for the debate stage.

Nader and Amato (2001) argue that the CPD serves as a gatekeeping institution whose rules systematically marginalize nonmajor candidates. Winger (1996) and Hall (2005) similarly emphasize that debate participation confers political legitimacy, shaping media coverage and voter perceptions of viability. Without the opportunity for a candidate to participate in a nationally televised debate, they lose legitimacy as possible victors in the eyes of the public. Perot attempted to challenge his exclusion from the debates in a lawsuit, but the suit was dismissed, ultimately cementing the CPD's authority to maintain restrictive participation criteria (FEC 1996).

Public Perception and Name Recognition

Public perception and name recognition form additional major barriers to third-party and independent electoral success, compounding the effects of institutional obstacles. This applies particularly in a system where the plurality rule encourages voters to avoid “wasting” their vote on candidates perceived as unlikely to win. Voters often internalize the strategic logic of "wasted votes," perceiving support for independent candidates as futile even when they may agree with their policy positions (Burden, 2007). Riker (1982) identifies this as the psychological effect of Duverger’s Law: voters internalize the belief that only two candidates are viable, thus shaping their assessments of independent and third-party candidates regardless of policy preference.

Historically, third-party name recognition has fluctuated based on shifting partisan alignments. Third-party presidential support declined sharply after the New Deal, when the Democratic Party absorbed the policy space traditionally occupied by left-wing minor parties (Hirano and Snyder, 2007). Voters came to view the major parties as more ideologically comprehensive, reducing demand for alternative candidates and weakening the organizational bases of third-party movements. Additionally, media institutions often exacerbate the structural disadvantages facing third parties and independents. Mainstream media outlets routinely marginalize independent candidates, often dismissing them as spoilers even when they amass significant public support (Nader and Amato).

Research Contribution

This research connects theoretical insights about structural barriers to actual campaign performances in presidential elections. While independent and third-party candidates are formally permitted to run, the electoral system imposes legal, financial, and institutional obstacles that significantly hinder their ability to compete. By applying the factors identified in

the literature, including ballot access laws, campaign financing, debate access, and public perception, to specific campaign cases, this thesis illustrates how these barriers operate in practice. In demonstrating how structural disadvantages shape real electoral outcomes, this project contributes to a broader understanding of how political competition is constrained by institutional design, raising questions about the viability of electoral competition.

Research Question: How did the factors that determine third-party and independent candidates' success influence the performances of candidates in the 1992 and 1996 presidential elections?

Methodology

This thesis uses a case-study-based approach to investigate what structural barriers most significantly hinder third-party and independent candidates' success. These candidates' campaigns serve as a prominent example of the limitations of third-party and independent candidates' successes in U.S. presidential campaigns. This study uses existing literature to inform what structural barriers most significantly hinder their success, then uses case studies of third-party and independent candidates from 1992 and 1996 to evaluate how these factors affected their performances.

This analysis aims to identify and categorize structural barriers, including ballot access laws, campaign financing and resources, debate participation rules and access, and public perception and name recognition. I have collected accounts of each factor as they apply to each candidate. Then I used these findings to evaluate the degree to which the cases reflect the factors generated by the literature.

Ross Perot's 1992 and 1996 campaigns were chosen as cases in this study because evaluating the two campaigns of one person reduces the amount of differences that would occur between two different individuals' campaigns, allowing me to focus on the structural barriers that influence electoral outcomes, instead of personal factors. Further, Ross Perot ran first as an independent in 1992, then with a minor party in 1996. Doing a comparative analysis using these two campaigns as cases allows me to reduce as many confounding variables as possible to focus on the structural barriers informed by the literature.

Each case was evaluated to understand how these structural barriers affected their performance. Ballot access was evaluated based on whether or not a candidate gained access in each state, and the difficulty they had in doing so. Campaign financing and resources are

measured using data from the Federal Elections Committee archives to determine the total funds raised and spent, the source of the funds, and whether each candidate qualified for public funds and how much they received. Debate participation rules and access were measured based on whether a candidate participated in a nationally televised presidential debate, as well as examining the polling thresholds set by the Commission on Presidential Debates, and the conditions and consequences of such. Public perception and name recognition were measured using polls that measure name recognition, favorability/unfavorability, and electability perceptions. Additionally, existing literature and books written concerning these campaigns have given insight into each campaign beyond what information the polls offer. Overall success will be evaluated using the percentage of the popular vote. I have conducted a comparative analysis using existing accounts of these factors to highlight patterns across cases and draw broader conclusions about how structural barriers to third-party and independent viability inform their performance.

Case Studies Justification

This study uses case studies because such methodology is well-suited to analyzing structural constraints in presidential elections. King, Keohane, and Verba (1994) argue that case studies allow scholars to trace causal mechanisms in detail, especially when the population of relevant cases is small or when large-N statistical analysis is not plausible. The rarity of successful third-party and independent presidential candidacies makes small-N analysis not only acceptable but necessary.

Moreover, the selected cases reflect similar dimensions, which is advantageous for isolating causal effects. Perot's two campaigns vary in debate participation and public funding but are essentially identical in personal characteristics, allowing analysis of how structural

differences across cycles influenced outcomes. Additionally, case studies allow for greater use of qualitative evidence, including debate rules, media coverage, and public perceptions, which complement quantitative evidence and are essential in showcasing the mechanisms through which structural barriers shape candidate viability.

Case Studies

Introduction to Ross Perot and his Campaign

Ross Perot entered the 1992 presidential race as an unusual political figure whose candidacy challenged many assumptions about third-party politics in the United States. A billionaire businessman from Texas, Perot was widely known as a self-made entrepreneur who built his fortune independent of the political system. His public image reflected what some described as “the ultimate self-made man — a tough, determined, and often lonely warrior willing to take on politicians, bureaucrats, industrialists, financiers, third-world dictators, or anybody else who got in his way” (Goldman et al., 1994, 415). This outsider reputation gave Perot immediate credibility among voters frustrated with traditional political leadership.

At the same time, Perot’s public persona was complicated. He was often seen as both a populist reformer and an unpredictable candidate. According to Jelen, Perot was “a charming, witty, plain-speaking fellow who stood on a populist platform designed to help the common man,” yet he was also perceived as erratic, stubborn, paranoid, and frequently combative with the press (Jelen, 2001, 16). This contradiction became one of the defining features of his campaign. Perot appeared to believe that political innocence could compete with, and ultimately overcome, professional political experience, even though many within his own circle doubted he could win the presidency (Goldman et al., 1994, 424, 431).

Perot’s campaign message centered on three major themes: reducing the federal budget deficit, reforming the political system, and protecting American jobs from foreign competition (Jelen, 2001, 8). He argued that the deficit symbolized broader failures in government and proposed a plan to balance the budget within five years, contingent on slashing many government programs (Goldman et al., 1994, 474). In addition to fiscal reform, Perot emphasized

political reform measures such as term limits, restrictions on lobbyists and political action committees, and expanded public access to campaign communication (Rapoport and Stone, 2005, 55). His campaign framed these proposals as part of a broader effort to challenge partisanship and professional politics, presenting government dysfunction as a problem of “politics as usual” rather than ideological disagreement (Jelen, 2001, 7).

Perot’s entry into the presidential race reflected this identity as an outsider. Perot portrayed himself as a reluctant candidate who was merely responding to the public’s demand for leadership (Goldman et al., 1994, 413). He insisted that he would only campaign if ordinary citizens placed him on the ballot nationwide (Goldman et al., 1994, 421). This beginning to the campaign reinforced the idea of a campaign driven “not by the candidate but by the people,” emphasizing grassroots mobilization rather than traditional party organization (Goldman et al., 1994, 423).

Perot’s supporters responded well to this anti-establishment orientation. His voters came from both major parties and were often described as “zealots of the center,” rejecting the ideological extremes and partisan conflict associated with Democrats and Republicans (Jelen, 2001, 2, 6). Many supporters were motivated by dissatisfaction with government performance and frustration with the perceived similarity of the two major parties (Jelen, 2001, 36; Goldman et al., 1994, 422). Further, Perot’s candidacy resonated with voters who were disillusioned with President George H. W. Bush, uncertain about Bill Clinton, and frustrated with longstanding political grievances (Rapoport and Stone, 2005, 75).

Thus, Perot entered national politics with several unusual advantages for a third-party candidate: immense personal wealth, widespread name recognition, and a large base of politically alienated supporters willing to volunteer for his campaign. These strengths shaped

how Perot confronted the structural barriers facing independent and minor party candidates during the 1992 and 1996 presidential elections.

The 1992 Campaign

Ballot Access

One of the most significant structural barriers facing third-party and independent candidates is ballot access. Because the United States maintains fifty-one separate ballot-access systems, candidates outside the two-party system must devote substantial resources simply to qualify for the election. As Jelen explains, “the existence of fifty-one separate sets of regulations poses potential third party movements with a very high initial hurdle,” since ballot access is automatic for the Democratic and Republican parties but must be earned by outsiders (Jelen, 2001, 3).

Perot overcame this barrier through an unprecedented combination of volunteer mobilization and financial resources. In a practically instantaneous reaction to Perot announcing on *Larry King Live* that he would join the race if the people demanded it, volunteers began organizing petition drives nationwide, with many “beating down the door wanting to know how they could help” (Jelen, 2001, 37). Petition efforts quickly expanded into a large national movement; in one ten-day period alone, organizers received roughly a million volunteer calls (Goldman et al., 1994, 428). These efforts resulted in extraordinary success. By mid-September 1992, Perot had secured ballot access in all fifty states, submitting approximately 5.3 million petition signatures nationwide (Jelen, 2001, 20; Rapoport and Stone, 2005, 60).

Perot’s ability to clear this structural hurdle demonstrates the importance of resources and the capacity to mobilize. His volunteer network became “the largest set of activists of any third-party campaign for which we have relevant data” (Rapoport and Stone, 2005, 58). In short,

Perot's connections and previously established notoriety allowed him to quickly amass a massive, widespread volunteer movement, which allowed him to overcome one of the most difficult institutional barriers facing independent candidates.

Campaign Finance and Resources

Campaign finance is another major structural obstacle for independent candidates. In 1992, George H. W. Bush and Bill Clinton each received roughly \$50 million in public and party funding, while Perot received none and instead financed nearly his entire campaign himself (FEC 1992; Jelen, 2001, 4). However, Perot's personal wealth allowed him to bypass this disadvantage. He ultimately spent close to \$70 million of his own money on the campaign (Jelen, 2001, 143). In the final weeks of the election, he launched what was described as "the most expensive political advertising campaign in American history" (Jelen, 2001, 24).

Television became the centerpiece of Perot's strategy. Because personal campaign expenditures cannot be limited under *Buckley v. Valeo*, Perot was able to purchase large blocks of airtime for infomercials and political advertising (Jelen, 2001, 5). These infomercials attracted millions of viewers and allowed Perot to communicate directly with voters without relying on party organizations or traditional campaign structures (Goldman et al., 1994, 552).

Heavy media exposure also helped mobilize activists. Frequent television appearances, including many segments on *Larry King Live*, played a key role in building the campaign organization and attracting volunteers (Jelen, 2001, 53). In this sense, Perot's personal wealth effectively substituted for party infrastructure. His campaign strategy relied on petition drives followed by a nationwide advertising blitz, with Perot prepared to spend "up to \$100 million, if necessary," to compete with major-party candidates (Jelen, 2001, 16).

Debate Access

Participation in presidential debates is another critical factor shaping third-party success. Debate inclusion typically depends on perceived viability, polling performance, and acceptance by major-party candidates. Yet for candidates outside of the major parties, debates present a frustrating dilemma: “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” (Jelen, 2001, 4). Perot overcame this barrier in 1992 because of his strong polling numbers and large volunteer base. He became the first non-major-party candidate to appear alongside both major-party nominees in televised presidential debates (Rapoport and Stone, 2005, 69).

The effect was dramatic. Post-debate polls showed that Perot’s support nearly doubled, rising into the mid-teens and eventually reaching approximately 19 percent (Jelen, 2001, 22). Focus groups and media evaluations frequently ranked Perot as the strongest debate performer, and his favorable ratings rose sharply during the debate period (Goldman et al., 1994, 578). Debate participation thus reinforced Perot’s legitimacy as a candidate and significantly expanded his electoral support.

Name Recognition and Public Perception

Perot entered the race with unusually high name recognition for an independent candidate due to his business career and media presence. His campaign relied heavily on television appearances, beginning with a widely broadcast National Press Club speech and continuing through appearances on more than thirty talk shows (Jelen, 2001, 17). This media strategy produced rapid growth in support. By late May 1992, Perot’s polling numbers exceeded 30 percent, and by early summer, he briefly led both Bush and Clinton in national polls (Jelen, 2001, 19; Rapoport and Stone, 2005, 57). Many voters viewed him as a strong leader capable of

solving national problems despite limited familiarity with his policy proposals (Rapoport and Stone, 2005, 64).

However, weaknesses in public perception eventually undermined the campaign. Perot was often vague about policy solutions, with only a small percentage of voters believing he had offered specific plans to address national problems (Rapoport and Stone, 2005, 65). Additionally, media criticism intensified as the campaign progressed, particularly after Perot made unsupported claims about the Republican Party's "dirty tricks," which damaged his credibility and stalled his momentum (Jelen, 2001, 23). The most damaging development was Perot's temporary withdrawal from the race in July 1992. The decision shocked supporters, weakened campaign morale, and caused many activists to leave the organization altogether (Jelen, 2001, 39). When Perot reentered the race later in the campaign, his polling support had fallen dramatically, much of which he never recovered (Jelen, 2001, 20).

Analysis

Ross Perot's 1992 bid for president presents an unprecedented situation in which an outsider was able to overcome the many structural barriers that are designed to keep him out. Perot's preexisting fame, abundance of wealth, vast connections, media savvy, and dedicated supporters enabled him to crush the institutional barriers that many independents before him had not been able to overcome. Although he won 18.9% of the popular vote and finished second in several states, he failed to win a plurality anywhere (Jelen, 2001, 3). Thus, despite his success in surpassing these hurdles, Perot ultimately failed to win any electoral votes. Several factors outside of the presidency's structural barriers explain this outcome.

First, the campaign suffered from organizational weaknesses. The volunteer-based structure lacked coordination and professionalism, with leadership roles often assigned

informally and campaign planning frequently disorganized (Goldman et al., 1994, 431). Internal conflicts between professional consultants and Perot's inner circle further undermined the campaign (Rapoport and Stone, 2005, 63). Perot's commitment to an "untraditional" campaign became a refusal to follow the advice of his professional consultants, resulting in constant internal conflict and disorganization within the campaign.

Second, Perot's behavior damaged his credibility. His sudden withdrawal from the race in July 1992 shocked supporters, weakened campaign morale, and led many activists to leave the organization, reinforcing perceptions that he lacked the stability required for national leadership (Jelen, 2001, 39, 57). Negative press coverage further eroded his outsider appeal, particularly after publicized conflicts with reporters and unsubstantiated claims about targeted "dirty tricks" (Jelen, 2001, 23). These actions stalled his momentum in opinion polls and tarnished his image as a serious presidential candidate. Instead of a symbol of hope and change, Perot became seen as a "kook," whose behavior undermined the public's confidence in his ability to govern.

In sum, the 1992 campaign demonstrates that the structural barriers identified by existing literature preventing independent candidates from the presidency can, in fact, be challenged and even conquered with the right balance of resources. Ross Perot demonstrated how these barriers can be overcome by personal wealth, media access, and outsider appeal. Ultimately, organizational weaknesses and credibility problems generated by his own behavior prevented him from converting his popular support into an electoral victory.

The 1996 Campaign

Ballot Access

By 1996, ballot access was no longer a major structural barrier for Perot. Following the 1992 election, his organization, “United We Stand America,” evolved into the Reform Party, which sought to institutionalize Perot’s political movement (Jelen, 2001, 39). Through nationwide petition drives, the Reform Party successfully qualified for ballot access in all fifty states well before the election (Rapoport and Stone, 2005, 70).

The party formally selected its presidential candidate during the summer of 1996, when Perot won the Reform Party nomination after a controversial internal voting process (Jelen, 2001, 27). Because the organizational groundwork had already been laid after the previous election, ballot access posed little difficulty for Perot’s second presidential campaign. As a result, this barrier had minimal effect on the campaign’s outcome.

Campaign Finances and Resources

Campaign finance played a different role in 1996 than it had in 1992. Because of his strong showing in the previous election, Perot qualified for federal public funding and became the first non-major-party presidential candidate to receive such support, obtaining approximately \$29 million in federal funds (Jelen, 2001, 5; FEC 1996, 75). However, accepting public funding introduced new constraints. The funding limits reduced Perot’s ability to spend freely on advertising and media exposure, which had been central to his earlier campaign strategy. Accepting the public funds “made him appear to be a regular politician, and it limited the amount he could spend in the campaign” (Jelen, 2001, 144).

Although Perot continued to rely heavily on television advertising and infomercials, the impact of these efforts was reduced compared to 1992. For example, he purchased network

airtime for campaign messages immediately before Election Day, but these efforts did not generate the same level of public attention as in his earlier campaign (Jelen, 2001, 30). This time, Perot's commercials were drawing only half the audience they had in 1992 (Jelen, 2001, 30). Thus, while public funding provided resources and legitimacy to the Reform Party, it also constrained Perot's campaign strategy by limiting his ability to dominate the media environment as he had four years earlier.

Debate Access

Debate access became the most significant structural barrier facing Perot in 1996. Unlike in 1992, when strong polling numbers earned him participation in all three debates, Perot was excluded from the 1996 debates by the Commission on Presidential Debates. The Commission argued that Perot did not have a realistic chance of winning the election, and Republican leaders in particular opposed his inclusion (Jelen, 2001, 29; Rapoport and Stone, 2005, 74). Perot attempted to challenge this decision in court, but his lawsuit was dismissed, leaving the Commission's decision intact (FEC 1996, 10–11; Jelen, 2001, 29). Although the legal challenge generated some media attention, it did not increase public support for his candidacy.

The absence of debate participation significantly reduced Perot's visibility and legitimacy as a presidential candidate. This stood in stark contrast to 1992, when debate appearances had dramatically increased his support. In 1996, the lack of debate exposure reinforced the perception that Perot was not a viable contender, making debate exclusion one of the most important structural constraints on his campaign.

Name Recognition and Public Perception

Despite retaining high name recognition from his earlier campaign, Perot's public image had deteriorated by 1996. Media coverage between the two elections was often negative, and

Perot was increasingly viewed as “an eccentric, cranky politician” rather than a credible outsider reformer (Jelen, 2001, 144). This decline in credibility began even before the 1996 campaign officially started. Perot’s poor performance in a televised debate with Vice President Al Gore about NAFTA damaged his public reputation, causing his favorable ratings to fall sharply (Jelen, 2001, 28)

Perot’s media exposure also declined. Television networks refused to sell him the prime-time infomercial slots he had previously relied on, and the audience for his advertisements fell to roughly half of what it had been in 1992 (Jelen, 2001, 29–30). Polling data reflected this decline. Throughout the 1996 campaign, Perot’s support remained in the single digits, and the race generated little public interest beyond the two major-party candidates (Jelen, 2001, 26). The decline in support was widespread across demographic groups, suggesting that it resulted from broader changes in public perception rather than shifts within specific constituencies (Jelen, 2001, 11). By the time of the election, Perot was widely perceived as less credible and less capable of addressing national issues than either Bill Clinton or Bob Dole (Jelen, 2001, 152).

Analysis

Despite ballot access and name recognition not posing a barrier, Perot’s 1996 campaign for the presidency ended in far less success than in 1992, garnering only 8.4% of the popular vote and no electoral votes. There are several factors that explain the decline of his campaign in 1996. First, the broader political and economic environment had changed significantly. In 1992, the country was coming out of a recession, suffering from rising unemployment, and had a growing federal deficit, which created an environment receptive to Perot’s message about fiscal responsibility and political reform (Jelen, 2001, 87–92). At the same time, dissatisfaction with

both President Bush and challenger Bill Clinton created space for an independent candidate (Rapoport and Stone, 2005, 48).

On the contrary, by 1996, the United States was experiencing economic recovery, rising consumer confidence, and declining deficits. Citizens expressed greater trust in government and more confidence in the major parties' ability to address national problems (Jelen, 2001, 65, 145). As a result, the dissatisfaction that had fueled Perot's outsider appeal in 1992 was less pronounced. Without economic crisis or unpopular major-party candidates, Perot struggled to connect with voters (Rapoport and Stone, 2005, 73).

Second, Perot's credibility declined substantially between elections. Many former supporters became disillusioned with him personally, often citing his earlier withdrawal from the 1992 race or doubts about his stability and electability (Jelen, 2001, 157). Among voters with higher education levels, the decline in support was particularly pronounced, suggesting that negative media evaluations influenced perceptions of his candidacy (Jelen, 2001, 152).

Finally, structural barriers reinforced these problems. With less money to spend, no debate participation, and reduced media coverage, Perot struggled to project the image of a viable candidate (Jelen, 2001, 159). Without the favorable economic issues, outsider momentum, or political dissatisfaction that had propelled his earlier campaign, the Reform Party's electoral prospects were limited, and their candidate could not overcome the institutional barriers he once defeated (Rapoport and Stone, 2005, 71).

Conclusion

Ross Perot's presidential campaigns demonstrate both the possibilities and limits of third-party politics in the United States. Although he did not win, nor did he produce a lasting national party organization, his movement had a significant impact on American politics by influencing voter behavior, reshaping party coalitions, and altering the policy priorities of the major parties. Most importantly, he proved that the formidable barriers that prevent would-be minority and independent candidates from launching presidential campaigns, and the American public from engaging with them, can be meaningfully challenged and defeated with the right balance of resources and timing.

Like many third-party movements in American history, Perot's political organization struggled to survive beyond its founder. Scholars have noted that successful third parties often disappear after a single election, particularly when they are centered on a candidate's personality rather than a durable ideological cause (Rosenstone, Behr, and Lazarus, 1984, 81–82). Perot's Reform Party reflected this pattern. Although the party achieved ballot access nationwide and later saw limited success, most notably Jesse Ventura's election as governor of Minnesota in 1998, it did not become a stable national political party (Jelen, 2001, 1).

Nevertheless, Perot's campaigns had a measurable influence on the Republican Party. Many of Perot's supporters eventually shifted toward Republican candidates, contributing to the party's electoral successes in the mid-1990s. Research shows that the movement of Perot voters into the Republican coalition played an important role in the party's victories in the 1994 congressional elections and continued to shape Republican electoral politics throughout the decade (Rapoport and Stone, 2005, 205). As these voters and activists joined the party, they also

influenced its issue priorities, demonstrating how third-party movements can reshape major-party coalitions even after the movement itself declines (Rapoport and Stone, 2005, 210).

More broadly, Perot's campaigns illustrate the agenda-setting role of third parties in American politics. Third parties often introduce ideas and policy concerns that the major parties initially ignore, serving as vehicles for citizens dissatisfied with existing political options (Rosenstone, Behr, and Lazarus, 1984, 221). Once a third party attracts significant public support, major parties frequently adopt its issues in order to regain voters. In this way, the influence of third parties lies less in winning elections than in shaping political debate and public policy (Rosenstone, Behr, and Lazarus, 1984, 8). Perot's campaigns exemplify this process. His emphasis on deficit reduction, political reform, and dissatisfaction with Washington politics helped signal to both parties that a substantial portion of the electorate felt alienated from the existing political system (Rapoport and Stone, 2005, 123). Even after the Reform Party declined, many activists retained their political commitments and carried them into the two-party system, allowing the movement's ideas to persist (Rapoport and Stone, 2005, 142).

The timing of Perot's campaigns also illustrates the conditions under which third-party candidates are most likely to succeed. Strong third-party challenges often emerge during periods of economic difficulty, dissatisfaction with major-party leadership, or when important issues are neglected by both parties (Rapoport and Stone, 2005, 48). Perot's success in 1992 reflected these conditions, while his decline in 1996 demonstrated how quickly support for outsider candidates can fade when economic conditions improve and trust in government increases.

Perot's campaigns, therefore, suggest that viable third-party candidates typically require a combination of personal resources, media visibility, and favorable political conditions. As one scholar notes, Perot possessed three attributes that compensated for many institutional

disadvantages: “money, media savvy, and novelty” (Jelen, 2001, 158). These characteristics allowed him to mount one of the most successful independent presidential campaigns in modern American history, even without party infrastructure. Ultimately, Ross Perot’s presidential bids demonstrate that third-party success does not necessarily entail winning an election. Although Perot never won electoral votes, his campaigns influenced voter coalitions, party agendas, and political discourse in lasting ways. At the same time, his campaigns also show that third parties are not inherently doomed to irrelevance. Under the right political conditions, such as when dissatisfaction with the major parties is high and when a compelling candidate emerges, there remains a possibility that third-party and independent candidates can still overcome institutional barriers, achieve significant electoral success, and even win the presidency.

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