

Continuing to "Shock the World"

By Robert P. Daves

Minnesota Governor Jesse Ventura continues to shock the world—at least the political world. His 73% job approval rating, reported in the July 22 *Star Tribune*, startled his staffers and the pundits alike (see Figure 1).

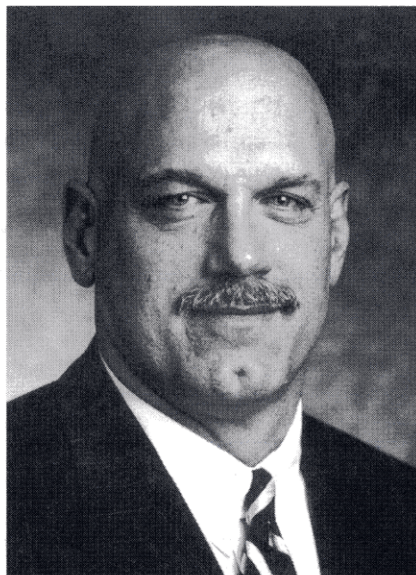
The newspaper's Minnesota Poll measured the 73% rating, the highest ever for a Minnesota governor, in its July 6-14 statewide telephone poll of 1,001 adults.

The percentage-point nitpickers will quibble with the "highest" label. His 73% high-water mark is one point higher than his January job approval, and a point higher than the ratings for several of the state's past chief executives. The Minnesota Poll began asking about job approval for its governors in 1947, and in May 1954, 72% of Minnesotans gave a thumbs up to then-Governor C. Elmer Anderson. Governor Rudy Perpich reached that level in August 1984. All of those are within the polls' margins of sampling error.

But still, one has to ask why nearly three-quarters of the state's adults approve of the way that a former professional wrestler, whose trademark was a

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pink boa, is handling his job as governor? And why is this bullet-headed former Navy SEAL and former radio talk show host so personally popular in the North Star state?



Governor Jesse Ventura

The naysayers warned after the first measure, a 72% approval mark right after he took office in January, to wait until the Reform Party governor tangled with the Democrats and the Republicans in the legislative session. They forecasted a contentious session, which focused on the state's biennial budget.

Tax rebate? The governor wanted one, the lawmakers quibbled about how, and by the time you read this the checks are

supposed to be in the mail. Ventura, a high-octane thrill guy, also wanted a ban on metal snowmobile studs repealed. (For the unwashed who may not be familiar with the folkways of the far north, snowmobiles are recreational vehicles that allow those who have such inclinations to ride at high speeds on special trails in the snow. Some have metal studs on their tracks, which provide better traction on ice but can also tear up whatever's under the snow.) The stage was set between those who wanted less environmental impact and the resort owners who loved the dollars snowmobilers—metal studded or not—spent. Jesse got the repeal.

He said he drew a line in the sand, refusing to deal on a number of such items as the snowmobile studs, saying he would veto whatever he didn't agree with. But then everyone came out smiling in May after he—and other political leaders—modified some of their positions.

Perhaps Ventura gets high ratings because voters still think of what could have been, and are breathing a sigh of relief. In last year's election, the choice was between Ventura and Norm Coleman, mayor of St. Paul who had renounced his long standing with the Democratic Party to become a Republican, and Democrat Hubert H. Humphrey III, the state's attorney general of many years and son of former Vice President Hubert H. Humphrey. A Minnesota Poll conducted just before the election

suggested that a large number of voters continued to see Humphrey as a tax-and-spend liberal, as Coleman had painted him. But they also saw Coleman as an opportunist whose ideological tree swayed to whatever political wind happened to be blowing at the time.

The economy aphorism—it's the economy, stupid—also may help explain some of Ventura's popularity. Minnesota recently posted the lowest unemployment rate in the nation. Tax revenues, as in other states, are bursting the coffers. Both these things may be what's prompting record percentages of Minnesotans to say things in the state are going in the right direction, not "off on the wrong track."

There is a bit of explanation in the demographics. The tough-guy image may appeal slightly more to the men than to the women: 77% of men approve of the way Ventura is handling his job as governor while 70% of women approve. Those with less education are more likely to give him a "thumbs up" than those with more education. In April, his approval rating dropped 10 points—not unexpectedly—after the

pre-legislative honeymoon period. That April drop came mainly among 18 to 24 year-olds, the group that got much of the credit for helping elect him. They're back in the fold now, with 71% giving him a "thumbs up" in the July poll.

"His appeal continues to be strong among those searching for a simpler time, an honest politician, one who's less pretentious and doesn't admit to having all the answers."

It may be geographic, too. He appeals more to those who live outside the Twin Cities metro area, especially the heavily Democratic northern part of the state.

If partisan politics and political ideology are playing a part, it's small. A strong majority of Democrats (67%), Republicans (72%) and everyone else (74%) approve of the way Ventura's doing his job. Liberals are most apt to

be critical, with a 32% disapproval rating, compared with only 19% among moderates and 26% among conservatives.

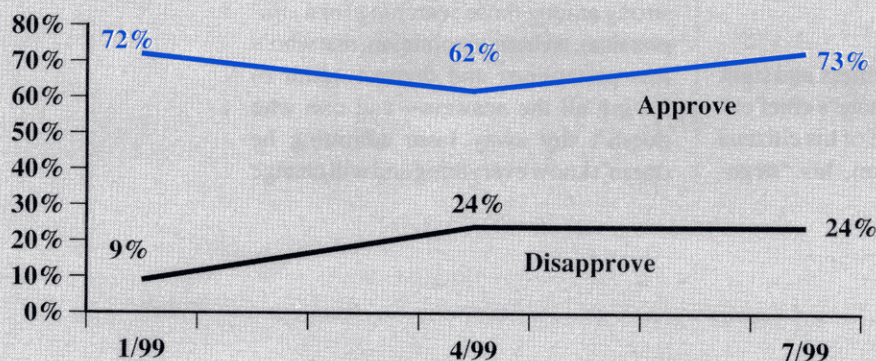
Another explanation is that Minnesotans may have a fondness in their hearts for oddball leaders. Democratic Governor Rudy Perpich, who served several non-contiguous terms as governor and who *Newsweek* saddled in 1990 with the moniker "Governor Goofy" for his eccentricity, comes to mind. (One of his proposals? A chopstick factory in the forests of Northern Minnesota that would make chopsticks for the Chinese.) Needless to say Ventura certainly fits the mold.

Ventura's blatant self-promotion—the book tour (*I Ain't Got Time To Bleed*), the national talk shows, the celebrity golf tournament (he shot 132 over par and finished dead last, but won \$1,080), and the report of a potential million dollar wrestling referee deal that broke during the July poll's fieldwork—hasn't hurt his popularity. Fifty-seven percent said his "time spent promoting himself is

Figure 1

Ventura Remains Popular

Question: Do you approve or disapprove of the way Jesse Ventura is handling his job as governor?



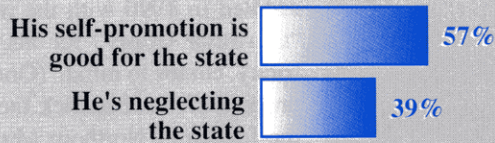
Note: Minnesota residents.

Source: Survey by the Minnesota Poll, July 6-14, 1999.

Figure 2

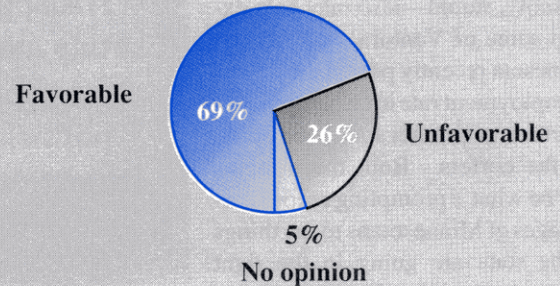
Marketing Himself Hasn't Hurt

Question: Here are two statements about Governor Jesse Ventura. Please tell me which comes closest to your opinion.... Jesse Ventura spends so much time promoting himself that he's neglecting state business, or Jesse Ventura's time spent promoting himself is good for the state.



Note: Minnesota residents.
Source: Survey by the Minnesota Poll, July 6-14, 1999.

Question: Thinking about Jesse Ventura as a person, do you have a favorable or unfavorable impression of him?



Note: Minnesota residents.
Source: Survey by the Minnesota Poll, July 6-14, 1999.

good for the state,” compared with 39% who said that he “spends so much time promoting himself that he’s neglecting state business” (see Figure 2).

“We don’t own the governor,” poll respondent Arnold Olsen, a 56-year-old plumber, told *Star Tribune* reporter Conrad deFiebre, “He’s got a right to do some private stuff. Besides, it brings attention to the state.”

Ventura’s official spokesman, John Wodele, chalks up Ventura’s popularity to his independence. “It goes to show that if you don’t govern by the polls, you’re likely to get good numbers,” he told deFiebre.

But all is not sweetness and light for the Gopher State’s chief executive. As more of his citizens have gotten to know him, his “nega-

tives”—the percentage who disapprove of the way he’s doing his job—have risen. Earlier in the year, about one in five had no opinion about how he was handling his job. Now, only one in 20 give no opinion while his disapproval rating has risen from 9% in January to 24% in July. That’s understandable, because his coverage by the national news media is more than is usually given a freshman governor and because the state’s news organizations have covered him extensively—and some say more critically—than before the election.

Although Ventura’s disapproval rating has risen, his appeal continues to be strong among those searching for a simpler time, an honest politician, one who’s less pretentious and doesn’t admit to having all the answers—and one who doesn’t shy away from admitting he doesn’t know everything and will change

his position from time to time.

“I trust a man who says, ‘I can’t promise you anything, but I’ll do the best I can,’” said respondent John Rieder, a 47-year-old airline supervisor who was interviewed for the poll.

The best he’s done so far is a 73% approval rating. There are 27 more points to get to 100%. But in Ventura vernacular, 73 certainly ain’t bad. ●