

# EXIT POLLING '92: ON THE PEROT FACTOR, AND "WHO VOTES?"

*By James A. Barnes*

Exit polls are used by the media to get an early call on elections. But, standing back a bit, they are also useful to analysts who want a deeper sense of the decisions voters are groping toward. Examination of exit polling thus far in 1992 casts light on two interesting questions: (1) If H. Ross Perot enters the race as an independent candidate, what potential Bush votes and what potential Clinton votes would he be most likely to get? And (2) who has been bothering to vote this year, especially on the Democratic side, where there has been real if highly unusual contest for the nomination?

On the matter of hypothetical Perot support, let's be clear at the outset that most voters know very little about the billionaire Texan. Some support him because they are dissatisfied with the major party candidates, others because it's a free ride this early in the campaign. Whether or not particular groups of voters will turn to Perot when they actually make their final "priced" decision is problematic, so predictions at this stage about a Perot vote are risky. The following is, however, a summary of what we learn about the potential Perot vote from what primary-day voters tell the polls.

## **In Search of a Perot Constituency**

If you want to find out who's most likely to defect from the major party ranks this fall to the independent candidacy of Texas tycoon H. Ross Perot, look—not surprisingly—for the discontented voters. Primary night exit polls conducted by Voter Research and Surveys, the television network consortium, define the Perot constituency by what people think of Bill Clinton and George Bush, not by identifiable demographic groups.

Two of the best predictors for identifying Republican primary voters who now

appear the more likely to abandon their party in the fall are people's opinions of how George Bush is handling the presidency, and their views of the national economy.

In Republican primaries as varied as Georgia, Maryland, Oklahoma, and Florida, about one-third of the voters disapproved of the job Bush was doing as president. Roughly one-fifth to two-fifths of these dissatisfied GOPers said that they would vote Democratic in the general election. In later contests, like Connecticut, Illinois and Michigan, where Clinton, as opposed to a nameless Democrat, was listed as the fall alternative, about one-third of those who disapproved of Bush's job performance opted for the Arkansas governor.

In all seven of these states, Bush *was still the choice of about half of Republican primary voters who gave him a negative rating*. The rest of the naysayers said that they wouldn't vote in November, or they didn't answer this question on the exit poll. Bush has little to worry about among those who approve of the way he has handled his job—95% said that they would vote for him in November.

When Perot was added to the menu of candidates, the tastes of the dissatisfied Republican primary voters shifted dramatically: In a three-way contest among Bush, Clinton and Perot, the Texas businessman became the favorite of those Republicans who disapproved of Bush's performance and wanted a change. In Wisconsin, one-third said they'd go for Perot. More than 40% opted for Perot in Minnesota. In Kansas and Pennsylvania, almost half of Bush's Republican detractors said that they would back Perot. In all four states, only about one-tenth of these unhappy Republicans said that they would pull the lever for Clinton.

Bush didn't escape the Perot fallout. Although he had earlier retained the loyalty of about half of the Republicans who disapproved of his job performance, with Perot in the picture his support in this group dipped to about 40% in Wisconsin, 35% in Minnesota, 25% in Kansas, and 26% in Pennsylvania. Perot had much less of an impact among Republican primary voters who approved of the job Bush was doing—83 to 92% said they'd stand by the President, even with Perot on the ballot.

Another good gauge of potential Republican defectors in the general election is their view of the economy. Most GOP primary voters have been willing to give Bush a lot of grace on this issue. Among those who say that the economy is "not so good"—usually a little more than half of all Republican primary voters—Bush is an overwhelming favorite for the fall, supported for reelection by more than 80% in most states.

There is less patience with Bush on the economy, however, among those who judge its condition to be "poor," often one-fifth to one-fourth of the GOP primary voters. In the balloting before April 7, only a little more than half of these voters said they would stick with Bush in the fall. Anywhere from 20 to 40% thought they would switch to Clinton.

Once Perot was thrown into the mix in Kansas, Minnesota, Wisconsin, and Pennsylvania, he appeared to capture anywhere from a third to a half of Republicans with the most pessimistic view of the economy. Clinton became an asterisk, garnering only about 5% of the GOP's pessimists, except in the Keystone State, where he received 13%. Bush's generally solid support among those Republicans who see the economy's health as "not so good" is eroded a bit by voters intrigued by Perot. One glimmer of good news for

Bush is that as the economy has perked up lately, fewer Republicans are calling its condition "poor."

Another economic indicator for predicting how people vote is how they view their own pocketbook. As one would expect, Republican primary voters who see their family's financial situation better now than it was four years ago are going to be Bush voters in the fall. The president regularly cracks 80% among this group. Likewise, Republican primary voters who think their financial situation has remained the same over the last four years are also sticking by Bush, albeit by a margin of 5 to 10 percentage points lower. Those who say their financial situation has worsened still give Bush majority backing, but their support level is generally 20 to 30 percentage points lower than that of those who say they have prospered during Bush's first term.

In the primaries before April 7, Clinton was the early choice of many Republican voters who saw their financial situation worsening, just as he gained support among those voters who thought the national economy was in bad shape. In Kansas, Minnesota, Wisconsin, and Pennsylvania, when Perot was added to the November equation, he eclipsed Clinton among Republican primary voters who thought they were worse off and cut into Bush's residual base in this category too.

#### **Democratic Primary Voters, on Clinton and Perot**

What is surprising is the flatness of Clinton's support among Democratic primary voters, despite how they view their own financial situation. The worse off Democrats are, the more galvanized they might be expected to be behind Clinton's candidacy, at least when matched against the Republican and the billionaire. Guess again. For richer or poorer, these Democrats said they'd vote for Clinton in the fall by about the same margins.

On primary night in Wisconsin, 41% of the Democrats who said they were prospering planned to vote for Clinton in

the fall; while 50% who thought their financial situation had deteriorated favored Clinton over Perot and Bush. In Kansas, 56% of those Democratic primary voters who said they were worse off were Clinton backers, while 49% who said their bank accounts grew would vote for Clinton. It was the same general story in Minnesota and New York.

Even though Clinton campaigned in the Democratic primaries against Jerry Brown's flat tax and Paul Tsongas's capital gains cuts, claiming both were close relatives of Reaganomics, Perot fares relatively well at this early stage among Democrats in Kansas, Minnesota, Wisconsin, and Pennsylvania who said their financial situation is worse now than four years ago. Among this group, 28, 33, 29, and 24% respectively thought they would vote for Perot in the general election over Bush or Clinton.

For most Democratic primary voters who are dissatisfied with Clinton as their nominee, Perot is seen as a much more attractive alternative than Bush—except in New York. Whether it's the natural skepticism that New Yorkers have for unknown quantities, or just their regional chauvinism, Empire State Democrats showed little enthusiasm for the Texan. In a three-way trial heat for the general election, he and Bush each received the backing of 16% of the state's Democratic primary voters, while Clinton was favored by 55%.

#### **Clinton's Character**

Among Democratic primary voters, as in the electorate at large, Clinton's biggest vulnerability comes in doubts about his character. The focus of the Democratic primary contest on questions about Clinton's personal life—allegations that he had an extramarital affair, whether he dodged the draft during the Vietnam war, his evasions on his experimentation with marijuana—has taken its toll. Here, too, the early Perot cashes in on a weakness.

When Democratic primary voters in Connecticut were asked about whether they thought he had the honesty and integ-

riety to serve effectively in the Oval Office, nearly half said Clinton did not. Among that group, a little less than a third said they'd vote for Bush in the fall, and a little more than a third thought they'd still back Clinton. Given a three-way November trial heat, Democratic primary voters in Kansas, Minnesota, Wisconsin, and Pennsylvania who doubted Clinton's honesty (36, 46, 45, and 33%, respectively) swung sharply behind the Texas businessman. More than 40% said they'd vote for Perot in November, while one-fourth or less would stick with Clinton. Bush was the early choice of 17, 12, 23, and 24% of Clinton's Democratic doubters in Kansas, Minnesota, Wisconsin, and Pennsylvania, respectively.

Once again, New Yorkers were less receptive to Perot. Democratic primary voters who questioned Clinton's honesty and integrity were divided roughly into fourths among those who would vote for Bush, Clinton, Perot, or just wouldn't vote or declined to say what they would do. Almost half of the Democrats voting in New York doubted Clinton's truthfulness.

Political analysts have noted that in Pennsylvania a clear majority of the Democratic primary voters said that Clinton had the requisite honesty and integrity to serve effectively as president. This was taken as a sign that Clinton's character problem was shrinking. But this finding may need to be tempered by the fact that in Pennsylvania, Clinton captured 57% of the vote, compared to just 41% in New York. It shouldn't come as any surprise that the more Clinton voters there are, the higher his honesty and integrity score will be. In New York, 49% thought that Clinton was honest enough to reside in the White House, and in Pennsylvania, the ratio of the Democratic electorate so convinced rose to 63%, an increase that matched the growth in his overall vote.

Less than 30% of the Brown and Tsongas voters in Pennsylvania judged Clinton to be honest enough for the job of president, roughly the same percentage who had doubts about him in New York. That there are fewer Brown and Tsongas voters in Pennsylvania may just reflect

the fact that the race for the nomination was widely conceded to Clinton after he won New York.

Aside from the grievance factor, it's hard to identify a reliable predictor of early inclination of defect to Perot. Among Democratic primary voters in Kansas, Minnesota, New York, Wisconsin, and Pennsylvania, Perot draws support rather evenly from the various demographic groups. His support is a bit more concentrated in the 45-59 age group, and lighter among those 18-29 years old. His supporters are also a little more concentrated in the upper income ranks, among those earning more than \$50,000, but not dramatically so. By educational attainment, Perot's vote almost mirrors the make-up of the Democratic primary electorate as a whole in these five states. Ideologically, his vote among Democrats is marginally more moderate and conservative.

Among Republican primary voters in Kansas and Minnesota who are ready to desert Bush in the fall, it's hard to define the Perot constituency. In Kansas his vote is older, in Minnesota it's younger. As with disgruntled Democratic primary voters, it's not who you are, but what you think, that's the base of Perot support at this early stage.

### **Primary Electorate Composition**

The biggest change in the 1992 primary campaign from the two previous rounds of nominating contests is what's missing: a Jesse Jackson candidacy. His two quests for the Democratic nod in 1984 and 1988 swelled the number of black voters who participated in Democratic primaries, and his absence from the 1992 field has clearly affected their turn-

out in most states. Only in three of the March 10 Super Tuesday primaries did black participation match its level of four years ago.

Mississippi, the state which traditionally has had the highest share of black voters in a Democratic presidential primary, repeated that performance this year. Some 43% of the Democratic primary voters were black, approximately the same proportion reported in the 1988 exit polls. Texas and Florida, the two largest and fastest growing southern states, also saw roughly the same ratio of blacks participate in this year's Democratic primaries—17 and 16% respectively—as in 1988.

But most states on both sides of the Mason-Dixon line saw a large fall off in black voter strength in the Democratic primaries. In Georgia blacks were 29% this year, down from 36% in 1988. In Louisiana the drop-off was from 39% in 1988 to 26% in 1992; in Tennessee, from 25 to 13%; in Maryland, from 26 to 16%; in Illinois from 27 to 19%; and in New York from 26 to 16%.

With this drop-off in black voting, and the contest for the nomination primarily fought between a moderate southerner and a neo-liberal refugee spouting pro-business rhetoric, liberal participation might have been expected to fall. Not really, but that depends on which television network's exit poll figures you use for comparison. This year, VRS found that roughly 45% of Democratic primary voters in New York called themselves liberal, 40% moderates, and 15% conservatives. In 1988, the ABC exit poll figures were 49, 32 and 18%, respectively. However, 34% of New Yorkers told CBS exit pollsters in 1988 that they were liberal, 49% moderates, and 12% conserva-

tive. Regardless of which network's numbers are used, the liberal proportion in Democratic primaries in Wisconsin, Illinois, Florida, Maryland and New Hampshire, stayed the same as it was four years ago, or even rose slightly.

Despite all the talk from Democratic presidential candidates about the meager income growth during the Reagan-Bush years, the party's primary voters seemed to do fairly well. The family income for Democratic primary voters in many states handsomely exceeded the national average. In some states, like New Hampshire, Maryland and Connecticut, it's even hard to tell Democrats from Republicans.

In 1990, the most recent year figures from the Bureau of the Census are available, 25.6 percent of all U.S. households had incomes of more than \$50,000. Given the effects of the recent recession, it's doubtful that many additional families cracked the \$50,000 mark in 1991, the year that VRS asked the 1992 primary voters to use in describing their total family income. In several states—New Hampshire (34%), Massachusetts (34%), Maryland (46%), Connecticut (47%) and New York (43%)—the families of Democratic primary voters had 1991 incomes of \$50,000 or more.

The "reforms" of the late 1960s and early 1970s, intended to democratize the process of nominee selection, have thus produced an upscale electorate for Democrats, the self-professed party of the little guy. With the decline in parties as an organizing force in American political life, perhaps it's to be expected that today's voters would be self-starters. That electorate, especially in less visible primary contests, consists largely of those who are better educated and financially better off.

---

*James Barnes is political  
correspondent for the  
National Journal.*