

"PEROT WINS!" THE ELECTION THAT COULD HAVE BEEN

By Gordon S. Black and Benjamin D. Black

Data gathered from the exit polls conducted by Voter Research and Surveys (VRS) on election day reveal there was much more support in the electorate for Ross Perot than either the popular vote or the pre-election polls indicated. VRS asked a national sample of 3,900 voters leaving the polling place if they "would have voted for Perot if (they) thought he had a chance to win." A remarkably large number, 36% of the total, said they would have. Another 4% actually voted for him, but didn't answer the above question—bringing the total potential number of Perot voters to 40%, easily enough to have won him the presidency. This clearly suggests that the pre-election polling had dramatically understated the appeal of Ross Perot's candidacy during the stretch run of the campaign. While not intentional, the understatement injured Perot's campaign by producing a "wasted vote" effect, common in three-candidate contests.

Why did the voters believe Perot could not win? Because pollsters and the media told the voters over and over again that he could not. During September and October, poll after poll (by different organizations and for different national media) portrayed Perot as too far behind to have a chance. Relying on this polling consensus, most analysts and commentators echoed the line nightly on news programs across the country. Voters were encouraged to abandon Perot for their second choices.

The exact calculation of 40% for Perot is based on three questions on the exit poll. First, 36% of the respondents declared that they would have voted for Perot if "they believed that Ross Perot had a chance to win." Next, 5.6% of respondents actually said they voted for Perot but did not answer the first question. Of these respondents, two of three said that their vote was a vote "for Perot" as op-

posed to a vote "against the other candidates." This is the additional 4% that brings the Perot projected vote to 40%. Adjusted shares for Clinton and Bush can be obtained by subtracting the people who actually preferred Perot (but voted their second choice) from the second choice for whom they voted. This takes 12 percentage points from Clinton, reducing him from 43 to 31%, and 11 points from Bush, dropping him from 38 to 27%.

A Polling Error

The failure of the polls to reflect accurately the real preferences of Americans resulted from the way they posed candidate-choice questions. Our own pre-election polls, not just those of others were at fault. The candidate-choice question generally asked is: "If the election were held today, for whom would you vote?" It is followed by the candidates' names and affiliations. This question was meant to be a "prediction of behavior," not an analytical one, but in today's television news formats it's often the only question reported.

This question simply does not reflect the true preference of voters when there are three or more serious candidates in a race. *What it tells instead is how voters are likely to behave on election day, predicted on what they believe about the relative likelihood of each candidate winning.* Where one candidate in a three-candidate race "appears" to have little or no chance of winning, voters who prefer him or her often vote for a second choice in order not to "waste" their vote. In 1992, Perot backers responded logically to the pollsters' questions: Not wanting to waste their vote, more than half indicated that they were going to vote for Clinton or Bush, instead of their actual first choice.

Had voters, the media, and the analysts understood that Perot had a real

chance of becoming president, based on what the voters actually preferred, the entire dynamics of the election would have been different. Furthermore, this information could have been available to everyone had respondents simply been asked: "If Ross Perot had a real chance of being elected President, for whom would you vote?" Or: "Regardless of *who may win*, who would you actually *prefer to win* the presidency?" President Bush would then have been the "third choice," and his voters would have confronted the problem of "wasting" their vote for Bush, or turning either to Clinton or Perot. Since Perot is closer to Bush than to Clinton on many issues, he might have picked up a majority of those switching to their second choice.

The implications are exceptionally disturbing, and the VRS results should force a rethinking of our coverage of three-candidate races. The actual outcome of the election (and the direction of American policy) may have been profoundly altered by an inappropriate and unfair media and polling effect. The underpinning of our democratic faith is the belief that elections should express the electorate's real preferences. That does not appear to have happened in 1992.

In addition to asking how people will vote, we also must ask them whom they really prefer, and give that preference equal billing with the voting question. This is especially important in the future, because we should anticipate many more three and four-candidate races in 1994 and 1996.

The Challenge For Polling in the Future

Some pollsters and analysts may, for ideological reasons, favor a polling methodology which systematically disadvantages third-party candidates. Many in the

W

Do any of the following apply to you:
(Please answer all questions)

		YES	NO
Military veteran	3	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Born in South	4	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Opposed the Vietnam War	6	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Have a friend or family member who is gay/lesbian/bisexual	7	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Would have voted for Ross Perot if he had a chance to win	8	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Am gay/lesbian/bisexual	9	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

Source: Survey by Voter Research and Surveys, November 3, 1992.

media, for example, appear to have a strong, vested interest in the maintenance of the two-party system as it is. Many others have historical roots and professional experience with one of the two major parties. Still other commentators simply did not like Ross Perot, and the idea that a plurality of Americans might have preferred him is repugnant to them. Nonetheless, we should also be sobered by the fact that we have just witnessed the first US presidential election in history

dramatically altered by an inappropriate use and interpretation of national polling results.

The intellectual solution to the problem is simple. It requires only a single additional question. Polls in three or more candidate races should ask: "Of the candidates for (President, Governor, Senator, Congress), which one would you actually prefer to win? Candidates names and affiliations would be given and rotated

randomly to eliminate order effects. By then displaying voters' actual preferences, we permit them to understand the full potential of each candidate. We have an ethical obligation—pollsters and journalists alike—to fairness, balance, and objectivity in our treatment of all contenders. The polling in 1992 did not treat Perot fairly, and if the correction we suggest is not made, future polling in three-way races will have the same deficiency.

Gordon S. Black is chairman and CEO, Gordon S. Black Corporation; and Benjamin D. Black was manager of survey operations, Voter Research and Surveys, during the 1992 elections