

# A Response to Gordon and Benjamin Black: PEROT'S OWN ACTIONS DETERMINED HIS FATE

*By Larry Hugick*

Ross Perot's showing in this year's presidential election caught most pollsters and political pundits by surprise. Based on the past performance of third-party and independent presidential candidates, the Texas entrepreneur was expected to lose support in the campaign's final days, as some of his backers decided not to "waste" their vote on a candidate who could not win. This erosion of the Perot vote never materialized, however. In fact, his share grew. The final Gallup/CNN/USA Today poll of likely voters had Perot at 14%, but he ultimately won 19% of the national popular vote—the highest total for someone other than a major party nominee since Fighting Bob La Follette, a Progressive, ran in 1924.

Gordon and Benjamin Black are on firm footing when they take pollsters and the press to task for underestimating Perot's appeal to the average voter. They are on shaky ground, however, when they charge the "polls/media complex" with undermining Perot's electoral chances. Contrary to what the Blacks assert, it was Ross Perot himself who decimated his credibility as a candidate. By abruptly dropping out of the race in July, Perot relinquished his chances of being a serious contender in the fall.

A Gallup poll for Newsweek taken soon after Perot re-entered the race assessed the damage of his hasty withdrawal. One-third of his former supporters had switched to another candidate. Nine in ten (89%) of them said his decision to quit the race was a critical factor shaping their [diminished] opinion of Perot. In contrast, only a third (33%) of this same group cited press reports about the "Investigator Perot" controversy as a major factor. In May and June 1992, Perot's support level in Gallup's polling for CNN and USA Today never fell below the 30-

percentage-point mark. In our tracking poll that began in late September, however, Perot did not come close to that level—he never reached 20%.

The Blacks claim that the traditional "horserace" measure failed to elicit voters' true preferences in this year's three-way race. But even if we discount the results of the trial-heat questions, the tracking poll provided ample evidence that Ross Perot was never the real first choice for president of a plurality of voters. For one thing, as he was about to re-enter the race in early October, the proportion of voters holding unfavorable views of him increased to a stunning 66%. To be sure, Perot's debate performance did much to rehabilitate his image in the final weeks of the campaign. Nonetheless, he never regained the advantage he enjoyed in the spring of being regarded more favorably than either of his two major-party opponents.

In addition, even as Perot's favorability ratings began to improve down the stretch, relatively few voters regarded him as presidential material. In mid-October, only 21% said he was "the kind of man who would make a good president, while 36% disagreed and 43% couldn't say. In contrast, 42% judged eventual winner Bill Clinton to be up to the job, while only 28% thought otherwise. Moreover, in late October, Gallup asked non-Perot supporters if they would switch to Perot "if it looks like he has a good chance to win." Only 12% said they would do so. At that time, we showed Clinton at 42%, Bush at 31% and Perot at 19%. If these results are reconfigured by adding and subtracting all voters who would switch to Perot from the appropriate columns, Perot moves up but not nearly enough to take the lead: Clinton remains

in front with 37%, while Perot (29%) and Bush (27%) are statistically tied for second place.

The Blacks' case rests entirely on one statistic: an exit poll finding that 36% of voters would have voted for Perot if they "believed that Ross Perot had a chance to win." That figure is not in dispute. But there are reasons to be skeptical about the conclusions drawn from it, given the lack of supporting evidence. First, the placement and format of the "chance to win" question were less than optimal for obtaining a precise measure. It was part of a multi-item "checklist" at the end of the questionnaire, a format often used to identify such groups as union members, environmentalists, anti-abortion activists, and other social groups for further analysis. The Perot question was inserted between two questions identifying voters who are homosexuals, or who have gay family members. It must be assumed that some respondents didn't pay close attention to the exact phrasing of the question. Secondly, exit poll respondents who liked Perot but didn't vote for him were given a second opportunity to show their support. This may explain the difference between the pre-election poll finding that only about 12% of Clinton and Bush voters would switch to Perot if he had a good chance to win, and exit poll results suggesting that roughly 30% would have done so. Their vote already cast, they had nothing to lose by putting in a good word for Perot, his ideas, or his debate performance.

Lastly, the Blacks assume that none of those who pulled the Perot lever would have voted differently if they thought he could win. Late in the campaign, Gallup found 5% of Perot voters saying they would switch to another candidate under

such circumstances. It's reasonable to ask: Did a fair number of voters support Perot even though they didn't consider him the best man for the job, as a means of sending a message about political reform or deficit reduction?

Perot was an unconventional candidate who ran an unconventional campaign. To the end, he had no strategy on how to put together an electoral vote ma-

jority. If the press and the pollsters were guilty of treating him as a candidate who couldn't win, then so too was Perot himself.

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## GORDON AND BENJAMIN BLACK REPLY

Larry Hugick's commentary is flawed in several important respects. The most important is putting so much weight on Perot's withdrawal in July. Perot's pull-out was clearly a consequential blunder, but then, too, was his selection of Jim Stockdale; and his prattling about "threats" also injured him.

Hugick, however, misses the real issue: That polling misinformed the public as to Perot's real strength in October. And here, the daily tracking polls were among the worst offenders. Hugick restates our argument as simply an attack on the media, which it is not; and he completely failed to address the important role of pollsters and the media in creating a "wasted vote" problem in three-candidate races. In addition, Hugick uses polling data from inappropriate periods in the campaign, largely missing the real dynamic of the election. Lastly, he misunderstands the usual direction of the error in the use of the "multi-item checklist" in the VRS data.

Ross Perot received 19% of the vote. Virtually everyone in the media and poll-

ing recognizes that this actual vote significantly understates Perot's true strength in the population. To claim otherwise is to say that everyone who preferred Perot probably voted for him. Hugick's own data from late October support the view that Perot was the actual "second choice candidate," not Bush. If this were known to the public, it's quite possible that Bush, would have suffered the wasted vote defections. No one can say, of course, that Perot would then have won. The point is that our traditional method of assessing the vote in a three-candidate race has, when reported, an unwarranted and unacceptable influence on voting behavior. Hugick ignores this problem altogether.

He also asserts that many Perot voters didn't truly support him. In fact, VRS data shows that 66% of Perot's voters were voting "for (their) candidate" not "against his opponents," only four points shy of the 70% who were voting positively for Clinton and Bush. The overall unfavorability index for Perot, reported by Hugick at 66% in early October, had dropped to just 43% in a CBS/New York Times Poll taken in late October.

Hugick criticizes the VRS question on vote choice if Perot were thought actually to have a chance to win. Now it is unfortunate that this item stands alone in providing data on this important issue. Nonetheless, research conducted by one of the authors at VRS shows that multi-item checklists at the end of the exit poll questionnaire consistently *underestimate* the items measured—because some voters don't finish the survey, and because of response-order effects within the list itself. Almost certainly, the percentage answering the question affirmatively—that they would have voted for Perot if they believed he could win—would have gone up, not down, had the question been asked separately and in a more optimal location.

The bottom line is that we must change the way we conduct election polling, to reflect the real and complex preferences of voters when there are three serious candidates in a race. Our public obligation requires that we achieve fair and accurate assessments of *all* the candidates in such contests.

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