

History 211 History of US Elections
Discussion Transcript for November 19, 2020
Election of 1992

Main Readings: O'Mara (chapter 8)

The 1992 election evolved into a three-way race (Bush vs. Clinton vs. Perot) that involved a changing media landscape and a number of policy challenges and voter attitudes which still remain persistent in American politics today.

24-HOUR NEWS CYCLE

STUDENT COMMENT: "Elections and their campaigns were vastly changed by the growth of CNN. As O'Mara puts it, CNN, "on air 24 hours a day... was able to break stories before the broadcast networks could get them, and the cable network could provide video content to local news outlets that were in fierce competition for ratings" (177). CNN's views surged as mass public events unfolded on national television such as the protests resulting from four white police officers beating a black motorcycle rider named Rodney King. More related to campaigns during elections, however, was the fact that CNN could "dig deeper into all aspects of the people running for president, including their personal lives" (182). The best evidence of the impact that CNN had on elections comes from the success of the Third-party candidate, Ross Perot. His campaign (or his first one at least) proved that Third-party candidates could successfully run for presidential office in the United States and CNN had a large part in that. On Larry King Live, Perot claimed "that if his supporters got him on the ballot in all 50 states, he'd run for president (178). As O'Mara claims: "CNN became the 'alternative' place for Perot to deliver his message and for his candidacy to be endlessly analyzed and dissected" (182). By using CNN as a medium by which he could convey his platform, Perot was able to distinguish himself from prior third party candidates and appeal to voters in a new way."

STUDENT COMMENT: "Clinton's advisors, recognizing the power of the media and outlets like CNN, often described the press as a monster that must be continuously fed, otherwise the press would feed on you. Clinton saw the advantage of being able to become a TV personality in his campaign, reaching as wide a base as possible. This allowed his campaign to gradually break the subtle rules of public behavior, proving that choosing political leaders was shifting more towards media control and the candidates' abilities to speak their message while adopting a personality capable of resonating with the television viewing public."

STUDENT COMMENT: " Bill Clinton, the winner of the election, fought to keep his personal life out of the media and strived to prove his strengths as a leader. Clinton fought against many contenders for the 1992 primaries since he was an unknown politician to voters. He was able to gain the nomination because of his label "The Comeback Kid" and his energetic campaign. His campaign focused on fixing the economy, unifying America, and debunking negative journalism. Clinton had a strong team behind him who worked diligently to keep him out of the press, spin stories, keep

tabs on the 24-hour news cycle, and convey his charm. He gained appearances on entertainment specials and late-night shows to appeal to young voters and minority voters. Clinton's team strived to keep him in the news cycle and understood the importance of journalism and its role in the election. Unlike his competitors, Clinton stayed consistent throughout the whole race about his goals for the country. After Perot dropped out of the race, Clinton was able to gain Perot's voters, who helped him improve in the polls. Clinton's successful campaign allowed him to achieve 370 electoral votes and beat out both Bush and Perot by a landslide. During Clinton's campaign and time in office, he could not keep his private life out of the press. His infidelity and other actions with women affected his reputation and the media led to his eventual impeachment. The press continuously released stories and rumors about Clinton's affairs and lies regarding his actions as President. Clinton's Presidency was deeply affected by the rise in media because his life and family lives were on display for all Americans to see. Though Clinton did great things in the office, his reputation remained tainted by his affair with Monica Lewinsky and ability to lie under oath. Al Gore, Clinton's running mate, reputation was also hurt, which pushed him to lose in the 2000 election against George W. Bush. Clinton's time in office began to display how the media reshaped the appearance and respect of Presidents. Also showing the shift to the modern idea that Presidents were chosen by so many more factors than just their policies."

PEROT AS PRECURSOR TO TRUMP

STUDENT COMMENT: "Ross Perot's insurgent candidacy in 1992 against both George Bush and Bill Clinton laid the groundwork for candidates like himself to succeed in the future, the most obvious example being Donald Trump. Towards the very beginning of biased, 24 hour cable news, Perot understood fully the power that this media could wield. Over 20 years later Democratic and Republican establishments still merely use the news cycle as just a tenant of their campaign, whereas "outsider" figures like Perot and Trump relied on this media to fuel a fire for their campaigns. O'Mara writes that Perot "had gotten to the top of the polls by being himself, the straight talker, the antithesis of slick." (194). It would be no surprise to see the same written about Trump. Both candidates used brash, unscripted language in order to grab the attention of cable news, which would in turn give their campaigns more coverage and ultimately more legitimacy. While Trump running as a Republican in 2016 meant that he did not really need this legitimacy, he proved that a fixation on cable news was still a powerful and effective tactic. More important than grabbing the attention of the media, this off-the-chain campaigning style allowed these outsider candidates to connect with "ordinary Americans". In 1992 and to a lesser extent in 2016, other campaigns imagined that the incredible wealth these men had would distance them from a working class base, but the opposite seemed to have occurred. With the ability to fund themselves, wealthy candidates can free themselves from time spent fundraising and have the luxury to claim that they are not behold by the money of interest groups."

STUDENT COMMENT: "Donald Trump is similar to Ross Perot, not only in occupation and personal characteristics, but also in base and strategy. Perot and Trump both

successfully won votes by portraying themselves as successful business men while hiding the full story. Perot got rich on government contracts and Trump went bankrupt numerous times. However, by self-financing and coming from outside of Washington, both candidates immediately won support from voters who were tired of the Washington establishment. Though Trump ran for a major party, many of his policies were not common within the republican party and his candidacy won former democrats and independents as well as conservatives. Both candidates launched and fueled their campaigns with the help of 24 hour news networks and the constant coverage that came with that. Perot and Trump were unconventional politicians which stood apart from the other candidates and won them free press. Trump's rallies and tweets dominated the news which helped further to proliferate his message and brand. In another striking coincidence, both candidates ran against scandal prone and somewhat unlikable opponents. George H. W. Bush's Republican Party was just as unsettled as Hillary Clinton's Democratic Party. This allowed both Perot and Trump to run outsider populist campaigns and win voters from major parties. Additionally, both candidate's sudden popularity was unexpected by the major parties, and both were discounted even once they did become popular. People were shocked when Perot jumped to first in national polls. Even after this astronomic rise, Clinton's campaign viewed him as a "quack" and the Bush campaign "did little to acknowledge his candidacy, figuring he would blow himself up at some point" (O'Mara). Hillary Clinton similarly underestimated Trump's popularity and called his supporters deplorables and never strongly considering defeat. Though Perot's and Trump's campaigns had very different outcomes, their approach and success seem to come from a similar place. I believe that Perot's rise set the stage for Trump's win and increased the favorability of a Washington outsider and businessman in the American consciousness."

STUDENT COMMENT: "In 1992, CNN was still young and not yet part of the establishment press. Perot's voters "disliked the mainstream press nearly as much as they disliked mainstream politicians"(153). In 2016, CNN was not a friend of Trump as it was for Perot, but rather was the epitome of biased and corrupt mainstream media for Trump supporters. One significant aspect of his populist message was the charge of fake news, directed specifically at CNN and others like it. For Trump, Twitter was the medium that allowed him to speak to the people in an even more direct and less filtered way than Perot. In different ways, both Perot and Trump "leapfrogged [over] the major media"(Ibid). One key difference between Perot and Trump is that Perot ran as a third party candidate whereas Trump ran an insurgency campaign for the Republican nomination. Both candidates garnered a great deal of support from across the political spectrum, forcing somewhat of a realignment of voters, but Trump's ability to bend the Republican Party to his will made the difference. He secured the support of most Republican voters and the party apparatus, while attracting Democrats and low propensity voters in traditionally Democratic states such as Pennsylvania, Michigan, and Wisconsin, where his positions on NAFTA and other issues echoed Perot and resonated with voters."