

Flirting with Power

The Presidential Election Process & Third Party Politics

Synopsis

Though there have always been fringe political parties in the United States, the Democratic and Republican parties have dominated the government for many years. In 1992, billionaire businessman H. Ross Perot came very close to upsetting the historic reality. Out of the strength and momentum of the grassroots political movement that supported Perot's independent run for president, the Reform Party was established. This program offers students an inside look at Perot's self-financed candidacy. It traces the successful Texan's rise in political stature from political outsider with no relative experience to a viable candidate who ultimately garnered 19% of the popular vote. Also examined are the role of the media in shaping public perception of candidates and issues, the limited reporting on competing political alternative viewpoints, especially those of third party and independent candidates, the petition process, Ballot Access laws, the Commission on Presidential Debates, and the myth of the "wasted vote." Students will be challenged to consider their own attitudes towards active participation in their government, and to consider the role and historic impact of third-party involvement in the political arena.

Questions to ask before viewing

1. What are the two major political parties in the United States?
2. What other parties can you name? Are there other presidential candidates on the ballot in 2004 besides the Democratic and Republican candidates? (Ralph Nader, the Green Party presidential candidate in 2000, is running as an independent in 2004. He has yet to secure ballot access in any state. Green Party, Libertarian, (research other parties on ballot)
3. Discuss with student their attitudes concerning voting. If they are of voting age are they registered to vote? Do they vote? Why or why not?
4. Voter turnout for presidential elections dipped to 49% in 1996. The average turnout during the past 40 years was about 52%. Why do you think nearly half of those eligible chose not to vote?

Questions to ask after viewing

1. Who did Ross Perot feel must be responsible for changing the political status quo? Why? (He felt the people were responsible; their apathy had allowed government too much decision-making power and the special interests funding political campaigns.)
2. What are Ballot Access Laws? (Laws regulating the name placement of political party candidate on state ballots)
3. What was the genesis of these ballot restriction laws? (They stem from the rise of the Communist Party in the 1940s and '50s, and were designed to keep the party off the state ballot.) How do the major two parties influence ballot access today? (Republican and Democratic legislators in state governments continue to write stricter ballot access laws to prevent their political competition from appear on the ballot. In 2004, Democrats challenged the Arizona petitions of independent presidential candidate Ralph Nader

- to prevent his name from appearing on the state ballot.)
4. In the media, politics is often referred to as a "horserace." Why? How is this perception problematic? (Politics is often followed like a game; a race. The public does not get a sense of what a politician stands for, but what he/she has done of interest in the last 24 hours.)
 5. Do you see evidence of horserace coverage in the 2004 presidential election? Explain. (Sources may include broadcast, cable, print, and internet news coverage.)
 6. How did Perot's use of personal resources to finance his campaign (as opposed to special interest money) affect his political policies, positions and campaign decisions? (He was free from entanglements with special interest groups; of having to make decisions to please and keep campaign contributors.)
 7. Discuss news coverage limited to 8-second soundbites. Is this a biased form of reporting? (Opinions will vary.)
 8. How did Ross Perot bypass the scrutiny of the traditional press and ignore the pundits? (To get his message out, he created the first political infomercials to be broadcast on national TV. In 1996, Perot was denied airtime for his infomercials.) How are third party and independent candidates using the media in 2004 to get their message to voters? (Internet, alternative media activism including political documentaries of Michael Moore and other grassroots efforts to get out the vote in 2004.)
 9. How valid do you think the suggestion is of a "wasted vote?" Will this political strategy have an impact in the 2004 election? Explain. (Answers will vary.)
 10. What criterion set forth by the Commission on Presidential Debates kept Perot out of the 1996 debates? (The CPD barred any candidate who it felt could not win enough electoral votes to win the election.)

11. What criterion do you feel is valid to determine participation in the debates? (In 1996, the CPD used polling data to eliminate third party candidates from participating in the debates. Answers will vary. Exercise: Track the criteria, participation and/or lawsuits of third party and independent candidates in 2004 election.)

Annotation

In 1992, H. Ross Perot successfully identified the sources of America's intense dissatisfaction with the political status quo. Tapping into the nation's growing frustration and disillusionment, Perot campaigned as a down-to-earth political outsider who was not afraid to discuss issues and challenge the election process. His strategy galvanized flagging voter participation in the political process and was the foundation of today's Reform Party. In this program, students will explore the origins of this grassroots political movement and examine the other contributing factors that influence the placement of a third-party candidate in the White House.

Length

88 Minutes

Subject Areas

Political Science; Government; Journalism

Audience Level

College students, Adult

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Discussion Guide

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Objectives

- To examine third party candidate Ross Perot's 1992 campaign for the presidency
- To explore the social and political climate of the time
- To understand the grassroots origin of Perot's popularity
- To understand the processes, rules and strategies involved in running for political office
- To discuss the role and influence of media in the political arena
- To examine the myth of the "wasted vote"
- To discuss the similar barriers to political participation by current third party and independent candidates in the 2004 presidential election