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LOOKING UNDER UNDER THE HOOD AND TINKERING WITH VOTER CYNICISM: ROSS PEROT AND “PERSPECTIVE BY INCONGRUITY”

MARI BOOR TONN AND VALERIE A. ENDRESS

This essay examines Ross Perot's 1992 presidential bid as a comic catalyst for a reinvigorated view of civic responsibility. Despite the Texas maverick's political naiveté and penchant for miscalculation, his very presence in the campaign reanimated Americans' conception of grassroots democracy. By examining important and previously unexplored distinctions between planned and unplanned incongruity, we probe the means by which Perot invited consideration of alternative political perspectives and offered an appealing glimpse into a dormant, more deeply held democratic ideal.

On several levels, 1992 Independent presidential candidate H. Ross Perot embodied and evoked contradiction. An outspoken critic of bloated bureaucracy and costly entitlements, the Texas businessman actually had amassed his wealth by cleverly parlaying government contracts into a Fortune 500 company. Self-touted as a political “outsider” averse to backroom diplomacy and shadow governments, he nonetheless boasted of his own covert and intimate courtship with presidential power. Nor did his purported disdain for “mud-wrestling” character assaults preclude his own trafficking in unsubstantiated allegations of sinister conspiracies against him by political party operatives. So, too, although Perot billed his presidential bid as a direct-to-the-people venture, he nevertheless largely eschewed most traditional face-to-face campaigning, even foregoing entirely the accustomed pressing-the-flesh primary process.

Public perceptions of Perot also evinced a Janus-faced quality. Millions saw the Independent candidate as a walking oxymoron—a billionaire populist, an extraordinary ordinary person, a larger-than-life “little guy,” views succinctly captured in the T-shirt slogan of one Perot disciple: “He’s just like us, only richer.”¹ A conflicted public, at points, expressed seemingly schizophrenic assessments of his potential leadership qualities, at once ranking him in one poll a distant third in “understanding the issues” but rating him first in addressing their foremost concerns.² Perhaps

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most ironic was that legions of Americans initially saw his foremost credential for the nation's highest political post to be his lack of elective experience.

Paradox likewise encapsulates Perot's political legacy. On the one hand, his third-place finish on election day failed to garner a single electoral ballot. Yet in no small measure, it was the astonishing grassroots clamoring for Perot's 1992 candidacy and his 19 percent share of that popular vote—the highest third-party showing in 80 years—that has rejuvenated interest in alternative parties and emboldened other outside-the-beltway presidential hopefuls. Indeed, his impressive showing in 1992 forced financial legitimation of the Reform Party through federal campaign funding. Similarly, Perot's effectiveness in using the "new media" of the televised call-in shows, coupled with the startling popularity of his unpolished, lengthy, and board-room-like infomercials has helped to extend the horizons of political talk and advertising.³ Beyond these effects upon process, many of the core political issues raised by the upstart Texan continue to preoccupy or bedevil the political establishment, among them the budget deficit and national debt, the influence of political action committees and foreign lobbyists, international free-trade agreements, and Saddam Hussein's biological warfare capabilities. In fact, despite mounting consensus concerning Perot's tendencies towards hypersensitivity, political paranoia, and simplistic reductions of complex issues, his exclusion from the 1996 presidential debates nonetheless produced an uproar of citizen protest. Perot's voice, citizens claimed, would render the electoral process more honest.⁴

In what follows, we explore Perot's reputation as a catalyst for political accountability by tracing his unorthodox 1992 journey from a potential president to one of the nation's foremost political provocateurs. It was, we argue, an essentially comic voyage thoroughly infused with incongruity, paradox, contradiction, metaphor, irony, and humor, all features that Kenneth Burke argues lend comedy its creative promise by their capacity to disrupt traditional world-views.⁵ Yet Perot's value was more thoroughgoing than the conventional assessment of his unmistakable gift for holding the feet of seasoned politicians to the fire regarding issue agendas, political habits, and public accountability. Rather, the Independent ticket pressed the citizenry into more honest reflection and introspection about the challenges and obligations of governing and being governed. Repeatedly and explicitly, Perot reminded disaffected citizens of their democratic duties and charged them with complicity in their estrangement from the political system they indicted. Furthermore, key fumbles in his anomalous campaign also forced an alienated public to weigh its hunger for sweeping political change against the clear risks such a wholesale alteration portended. Perot, therefore, vividly illustrates Burke's contention that a comic feature such as creating perspective by incongruity assists individuals in acknowledging and transcending their own foibles while also reconciling themselves to the imperfections inevitable in any bureaucratic rendering of an imaginative ideal such as democracy.⁶

To ground our claims, we stitch a text from fragments of discourse in the 1992 campaign, "pulling together," to use Raymie E. McKerrow's terms, "disparate scraps of discourse which, when constructed as an argument, serve to illuminate otherwise hidden or taken for granted social practices."⁷ In this case, our text exposes the public's capacity for prudential reasoning, a dialectical, deliberative process that numerous scholars contend, albeit speculatively, that ordinary citizens routinely employ in rendering political judgments.⁸ Composing our constructed text are transcripts of Perot's interactions with citizens and reporters on call-in and interview television programs, the recordings and texts of the 1992 presidential and vice-presidential debates, and the transcribed voices of citizens from among 625 participants in 62 focus groups conducted across the nation by communication scholars.⁹

CYNICISM, PUBLIC VOICE, AND CITIZENSHIP

To many observers, the vibrancy of Ross Perot's 1992 insurgent presidential campaign symbolized the escalating cynicism of the U.S. voter toward traditional politics. Ironically, at the same time that the nation's grand democratic experiment had taken root in formerly Communist soil, the 30-year downward spiral of Americans' faith in their own democratic practices and political representatives had reached an unprecedented low. The crisis of confidence peaked in the early summer of 1992 when Gallup reported fewer than one in four Americans rating government in positive terms and a meager two percent expressing unalloyed trust in government.¹⁰

To be sure, political wariness and skepticism persist as dominant legacies of the Vietnam and Watergate eras. Yet the vein of mistrust and discontent that Perot tapped into was of a different stripe. This new brand of alienated voter defied easy categorization, representing no particular party, ideology, single issue, or demographic profile.¹¹ As disaffection increased in size and scope across a broad spectrum, it also changed somewhat in kind, reflecting hostility toward Washington politics as a site of chronic corruption, incompetence, partisan gridlock, and pandering to selfish special interests.¹² For the angriest, the nation's capital constituted a political den of iniquity, redeemable only by a purging of professional career politicians. Others of the alienated assumed a more passive posture, appearing to resign themselves to powerlessness in the face of mounting bureaucracy, the increasing muscle of monied lobbyists, and media and political agenda-setting. Even for many who had not completely checked out of the political process, the tragic tendency of their perspective resonated in the common refrain that elections typically were a choice between "the lesser of two evils." Participants in a focus group discussion in Washington State acknowledge strands of this tragic orientation:

Male 1: I think people see Perot as an alternative. I don't myself. But the system at the grassroots seems to have broken down. It's business as usual down there.

Male 2: I think the biggest thing is that everyone feels no matter whether I get involved or not, I can't make a difference. The system is too big. . . . It's very easy to say, "Why should I care. It won't matter."

Male 1: Just to look at the spectacle [of the conventions] in Houston and New York this year between both parties, the finger pointing that went on, the fact that certain people couldn't be heard even [those] within the upper echelons of the party, those that supported [Jerry] Brown, those that wanted their piece said in the Republican . . . platform. Both [groups] were essentially put down by those in power, [which] makes me think that somewhere many . . . feel they have no voice and there is no reason to try. I have a voice and I feel like it's . . .

Male 3: Lost in the wilderness.

Male 1: . . . yeah, really lost in the wilderness.¹³

In recent years, concern with the status of the public's political "voice" has enriched political analyses by communication scholars and animated debates among contemporary political theorists. Particularly notable studies are Michael Huspek and Kathleen Kendall's ethnographic excavation of everyday experiences that impell loggers to "withhold their political voice" and Tarla Rai Peterson and Cristi Choat Horton's treatment of political alienation in landowners' narratives, a posture engendered by their exclusion from public policy formation in environmental disputes.¹⁴ Peterson and Horton's analysis, in particular, mirrors key themes in cynical talk surrounding Perot's insurgent candidacy. Concluding that landowners directly affected by government practices nonetheless "have chosen to withhold their voices from the political arena" that "no longer accommodates their interests," they write: "Without hope that discursive participation in mainstream politics offers them an authentic hearing, private land-owners such as these ranchers join other U.S. citizens who perceive that the public sphere is, at best, irrelevant to their lives."¹⁵ Yet, as Robert Branham and W. Barnett Pearce argue, "Non-participation may deny the legitimacy of communicative contexts but can rarely dissolve them,"¹⁶ a point elaborated by Huspek and Kendall:

Political voice . . . is a basic condition of freedom. Only in and through the expression and contestation of values, norms, interests, and policies are democratic citizens able to constitute themselves as free and willful actors who exercise control over the conditions of their existence. Withholding one's political voice, therefore, amounts to a forfeiture of self-determination.¹⁷

The intersection of public voice and spreading political alienation also informs radical reforms proffered by communitarian political theorists, many of whom acknowledge some intellectual ancestry in John Dewey's ideal vision of government as "creative democracy." To Dewey, a truly democratic government requires continual input by the governed regarding their immediate needs, their basic desires, and their ideas about setting priorities and handling an array of social problems. The core of genuine democracy, as conceived by Dewey, lay not in government's bureaucratic structures and procedural conventions. Rather, democracy is rooted in the fundamental texture of "community life," a social sphere of constant inquiry and flux in which citizens openly exchange perspectives and proposals, negotiate conflicting needs and opinions, and construct, contest, and alter norms and mechanisms for a collective existence.¹⁸ In contrast to a government calcified by outmoded agendas and traditional processes, a "creative democracy" is responsive to the historical moment and continually open to the need for normative change. In such a democracy, wrote Dewey, "No longer will views generated in view of special situations be frozen into absolute standards and masquerade as eternal truths."¹⁹ Such an approach to governing bridges the distance between the political "elite" and the masses by expanding the definitional contours of expertise. "The man who wears the shoe knows best that it pinches and where it pinches," wrote Dewey, "even if the expert shoemaker is the best judge of how the trouble is to be remedied."²⁰

Although Dewey himself provided no clear blueprint for the democratic ideal he regarded as necessarily provisional,²¹ his ideological descendent, Benjamin R. Barber, offers various concrete recommendations for what he terms "strong" rather than "weak" democracy. Notably, Barber proposes supplanting the professional politician leadership paradigm with models he terms "facilitative" from other arenas of public life such as education or business. In contrast to the conventional view of political leaders as anointed experts or agents empowered to act independently as public representatives, Barber envisions a brand of political leadership that privileges what Burke would term an "agency" function, whereby leaders become the means by which citizens are groomed to assume the role of active agents of civic competence themselves. In such a view, leaders "catalyze a people to *self*-government rather than governing on their behalf. . . . guide as far as they can and then vanish."²² Perhaps most tangible of Barber's recommendations for bottom-up democracy are communitarian initiatives he contends would induce popular participation in democratic communities, and ultimately produce institutional transformation by eliminating top-down agenda-setting and dismantling structures that silence ordinary citizens: electronic town meetings, corporate and government partnerships, citizen volunteerism, nationwide networks of neighborhood assemblies, civic communications cooperatives, and so on.²³

In striking respects, both widespread concerns and communitarian proposals for revitalizing and reconstituting a public political voice resonate in Perot's candidacy,

an irony given Perot's general dismissal by academic circles, including theorists such as Barber whose proposals the Texan personified in important ways. One of the few academics to appreciate Perot's initial allure, however, is populist historian Alan Brinkley, who credits the Texan's popularity to a latent or inchoate public passion for civic involvement. Yet Brinkley, like many contemporary political theorists, also acknowledges that increased voter turnout or other forms of behavioral engagement in politics are insufficient. Rather, relegitimizing political life demands discourse that nurtures "habits of reasoned reflection," thereby elevating politics to a serious "intellectual endeavor."²⁴ Borrowing from Robert Penn Warren's perspective, Brinkley argues that democracy has no meaning unless it fosters a "responsible self," through which "citizens aspire to understand the world in which they live and their place in it" and can reasonably "expect their leaders to do the same."²⁵

Although Brinkley, Dewey, Barber, and others advocate concepts such as "reasoned reflection," "democratic intelligence," and "facilitative leadership," most fail to articulate ways in which specific features of rhetorical action foster the dialectical, deliberative processes they champion as central to civic competence and civic identity. Dewey, for example, contends that creative democracy ultimately hinges upon "the art of full and moving communication,"²⁶ but how that art assumes its form remains abstract. Obviously, no single communicative schema for cognitive processes such as prudential thinking, practical reasoning, democratic intelligence, or political judgment can be presumed, particularly given the contextual nature of such processes. Nonetheless, exploring the comic features of Perot's unorthodox candidacy provides a valuable window into how many citizens in 1992 sifted through and weighed a complex assortment of messages, fluctuating contexts, and personal attitudes. In the process, many assumed, in Brinkley's words, a more "responsible self," came "to understand the world in which they live" more realistically, and ultimately rendered reflective and prudent political judgments about both.²⁷

Embedded in the insights into how perspective by incongruity influenced public political decision making are indications of how such perspectives affected public reception of specific communitarian ideas such as instituting electronic town halls, leveling of political "expertise," tapping non-politicians for political posts, and privileging a facilitative or agency-centered leadership model. On the one hand, careful consideration of the unorthodox texture of Perot's political persona, political philosophy, campaign practices, rhetorical style, and specific proposals can illuminate how and why such thoroughgoing political changes advocated by communitarian theorists become imaginable for the public, even in a seemingly recalcitrant environment. On the other hand, that Perot moved such proposals outside the cloistered debate of the academy into actual political contexts prompted recognition by some portions of the public that such innovations possessed a utopian cast. Consequently, comic features such as perspective by incongruity and inductive reasoning provide glimpses into how the facilitative leadership Perot himself often

championed may operate rhetorically. In significant respects, Perot's maverick candidacy encouraged increased public involvement in the campaign and fostered attention by the media and the mainstream candidates on disaffected voices and issues of concern to them. But Perot also provoked a deeper reflection by some citizens on the complexities, challenges, obligations, and even paradoxes of the messy process called democratic government.

THE IMPACT OF PEROT'S INCONGRUITY

As it is traditionally understood, an audience evaluates the actions of a rhetor—both strategic and non-strategic—in a context. Yet as Branham and Pearce point out, illuminating the relationship between a text and a context is often complicated by one or more factors: contexts are multilayered, typically complex, and often fluid; symbolism is ever subject to varied interpretations; texts may alter contexts even as they are influenced by them; and rhetorical purposes may be inescapably at odds with cultural customs, hallowed traditions, and institutional processes.²⁸ In Perot's case, analysis of his unconventional bid demands recognition of the differing contexts in which his candidacy took rhetorical form, contexts shaped by his official status as a potential versus a declared candidate, by the markedly diverse settings of the call-in shows versus the institutionalized ritual of the presidential debates, and by his audacious political savvy versus his political miscalculations.

Moreover, because our analysis also examines the pivotal role of audiences who enter into and engage the campaign at different times, we acknowledge that contexts for these different individuals are varied. For example, some citizens had followed Perot's insurgency closely from the outset, even working as United We Stand volunteers to place him on the ballot. Others, while aware of Perot's maverick bid early on and possibly even supporting it, became exposed to him and his proposals primarily during the presidential debates. Thus, responses to Perot matured at differing points during the campaign.

Distinctions between two types of incongruity admittedly are ambiguous, requiring critical attention to contexts that may be varied, multilayered, fluid, or rich in ambivalence about attitudes towards permanence and change. Burke conceives of shifting perspectives by means of incongruity as planned, as a rhetorical strategy designed to open space for reform by disrupting conventional norms, and likens it to the deliberate antics of a court jester.²⁹ We argue that a counterpart to Burke's understanding, a concept we term "unplanned incongruity," can be equally illuminating for audiences forced to weigh the missteps that reduce political actors to comic "fools." Because the more consistent pattern of participant response occurred in citizens' reflection on the dynamic interface between the planned and unplanned incongruity emanating from Perot's campaign, we organize our analysis according to this cognitive, dialectical process.

Planned Incongruity

During the initial stage of his unofficial campaign, Perot's conspicuous presence in "new media" formats and notable absence from more traditional venues furthered his persona as an unconventional, anti-system, "of-the-people" symbol. Until Perot's performances in the October presidential debates, his 32 appearances on call-in programs such as *Larry King Live*, *Donahue*, *The Today Show*, and others had been the mainstay of his public exposure. By ignoring the more conventional journalistic outlets of newspapers and nightly television news, Perot largely circumvented most established press norms and gatekeeping practices. Additionally, by delaying his official announcement until only 11 days before the first debate, Perot had eluded the conventional kinds of political inspection: the comparisons of candidates the primary process typically affords, the common "obligations" to commit to specific solutions, and thus the intense media scrutiny customary of leading contenders. Left without the typical measures for establishing candidate competence, the media portrayed Perot as a barometer of the political climate. Indeed, most media focused on his rising poll numbers as an indicator of voter discontent, on the vibrancy of the grassroots campaign to place him on the ballot in all 50 states, and on speculation about which of the major party candidates would suffer most from a Perot candidacy.³⁰ During the few days of his official campaign prior to the debates, most media were preoccupied with his possible inclusion in them.

In the beginning, Perot's clear lack of "fitness" for "politics as usual" was, for many citizens, his primary appeal. His attempts to alter radically the material process of the campaign offered the prospect that this provocateur would not be constrained by the usual norms imposed by insider politics. Merely by challenging ingrained political conventions, Perot disrupted the spiral of tragic alienation and cynicism. Perot's popularity constituted a dramatic shift in how the public viewed both politics and the political process: in a context in which some citizens conceived of politicians as held hostage by a political system resistant to change, Perot's enigmatic campaign signaled that he would not be limited or compromised by the usual trappings of traditional politics. Instead, citizens saw the political system, the "container," as permeable, his candidacy as a prime medium for change, and Perot as a vehicle for enhancing the public's ability to become active participants rather than mere spectators in the political process.³¹

Perot explicitly acknowledged the public's capacity for political intelligence, and his discourse comprised features that facilitated the exercise of practical wisdom, a key quality underlying sound political judgments. Indeed, the types of questions asked by citizens on the call-in shows help to explain much of Perot's initial "common-sense" appeal. Although the issues addressed were virtually indistinguishable from those raised by journalists, the approach was distinct, as ordinary citizens often shared personal observations about themselves and their external world as

warrants for their implied or overt political claim. Mirroring back this inductive process, the Texan repeatedly invited audiences to render judgments on issues ranging from the economy to foreign policy, employing the same critical tools they had developed in making sense of and managing their immediate world. For example, Perot constructed a hypothetical narrative to evaluate the president's decisions leading to the Persian Gulf War through the same lens one would use to judge a next-door neighbor:

I knock on my neighbor's door. I say, "We need to borrow your son and daughter to go to the Middle East." Say, "What for?" I say, "We've got this dude over there with [gold faucets in his bathroom and] 70 wives. . . . And we made a deal with Saddam Hussein—he could take the northern part of his country, then he took the whole thing. Now we're all upset. And by the way, we spent ten years giving [Hussein] all the money, all the power and what have you he needed." And I think you'd probably hit me in the face at this point. You're not going to send people over to fight and die for emirs and kings. . . .³²

Here, Perot engaged in what Burke terms "folk criticism," a form of incongruity in which people borrow experiences from one experiential realm and shift them metaphorically to another field.³³ Indeed, among the most salient features of Perot's talk was his couching of political issues in the metaphors of down-home, everyday life: sports, illness, family relationships, and domestic chores like car repair, cooking, and housework. He often implied that the challenges of everyday living cultivate commonsense critical reasoning skills that have become elusive to those career politicians hamstrung by what Burke would term their "trained incapacity."³⁴ In the first debate, for example, the Texan applied common sense to a Bush administration comment about converting defense operations into civilian industries:

We had someone who I'm sure regrets said it *in the president's staff* that he didn't care whether we made potato chips or computer chips. Well, *anybody that thinks about it* cares a great deal. Number one, you make more making computer chips than potato chips; and number two, 19 out of 20 computer chips that we have in this country now come from Japan. . . . [T]here's whole [lot] of intellectual talent in these [defense] industries. A lot of these people in [these] industries can be converted to the industries of tomorrow, and that's where the high-paying jobs are.³⁵

Also appealing were Perot's self-deprecation and his humorous broadsides at common practices he treated as patronizing toward the public. In stark contrast to the common view of politicians as aloof or self-important, the jug-eared candidate employed puns such as "If there's a fair[er] way, I'm all ears" or volunteered the unorthodox admission that "if I get to [Washington], it will be a very unusual and

historic moment.”³⁶ In addition to building trust and camaraderie with audiences, Perot’s humor frequently drew on ordinary experiences and observations by which people routinely render commonsense judgments, thereby wrenching the world of political decision making away from professional political leaders.

Because humor involves the “conversion downward” of what seems to be a monumental situation, Burke argues that it may mitigate against tragic resignation by convincing individuals that they have the power to alter the seemingly recalcitrant.³⁷ Like Burke, Marshall McLuhan frames humor as opening space for new ways of seeing by dismantling conventional modes of interpreting and behaving. “Humor,” write McLuhan and Quentin Fiore, “. . . does not deal in theory, but in immediate experiences, and is often the best guide to changing perceptions.”³⁸ For example, to underscore the revolutionary nature of his proposed “electronic town hall,” Perot humorously detailed Washington’s likely response by mingling the obviously absurd with echoes of more ordinary experiences:

[A]ll these fellows with thousand-dollar suits and alligator shoes running up and down the halls of Congress that make policy now—the lobbyists, the PAC guys, the foreign lobbyists, and what-have-you—they’ll be over in the Smithsonian, you know (Laughter)—because we’re going to get rid of them, and the Congress will be listening to the people. And the American people are willing to have fair, shared sacrifice. They’re not as stupid as Washington thinks they are. . . . [W]e’ll get it done. Now, everybody will faint in Washington. They’ve never seen anything happen in that town. (Laughter) This is a town where the White House says, “Congress did it.” Congress says, “The White House did it.” And I’m sitting there and saying, “Well, who else could be around, you know?” Then when they get off by themselves, they say, “Nobody did it” (Laughter).³⁹

Moreover, in this passage, Perot illustrates his explicit claim that “the people” are “not as stupid as Washington thinks they are” by casting his thoughts in the voices of characters rather than in indirect speech. Such “reported speech” or “constructed dialogue,” argues Deborah Tannen, increases intellectual engagement by modeling the dialectical, cognitive processes individuals use on a daily basis to draw conclusions and to test claims advanced by others.⁴⁰ Although Perot obviously exaggerates the extent of attributing blame and avoiding responsibility—“they say, ‘Nobody did it’”—his own query to this pseudo-conversation about partisan finger pointing—“Well, who else could be around, you know?”—illustrates the liberating potential of using what Burke terms “the resources of ‘popular’ philosophy,” such as “the working vocabulary of everyday relationships” to challenge and alter embedded social perspectives and to avoid being taken for a fool.⁴¹

Although Perot lampooned the Washington establishment by encapsulating citizen discontent brewing just below the surface, he did so without the sort of cynical resignation typifying the tragic frame. Accordingly, his talk most often assumed

the "charitable" quality Burke argues is endemic in comedy, in which individuals are painted as merely erring rather than essentially evil. In the first debate, for example, the Independent candidate explicitly assured his audience that "The people in Washington are good people" constrained by a "bad system" and their own lack of imagination.⁴² In this view, Washington suffered, not from villainy, but from "occupational psychosis"⁴³; bureaucratic socialization and political habits had conditioned politicians to act in fundamentally nonproductive ways. Notably, among the adverse behaviors produced was a system of top-down governance marked by "mud wrestling" and "finger pointing," a system that takes "10 years to solve a 10 minute problem," one paralyzed by "gridlock," given to "meandering and wandering" and filled with "empty talk."⁴⁴ Such "unwanted by-products" of the Washington establishment had created an "artificial city," bigger and more complicated than was reasonable.⁴⁵ To return politics to the democratic imaginative, Perot pledged to remain "issues-oriented, not personality-oriented,"⁴⁶ and to operate above the political fray by avoiding personal attack as a campaign strategy, clearly a comic rather than a tragic orientation to seeking political change.

Because Perot's "imaginative" ideal involved citizen immersion in the scramble of democracy, he often pressed citizens to acknowledge their collusion in an imperfect political system, a posture incongruous with traditional politicians who flatter rather than rebuke the public. Repeatedly, the Texan admonished cynical naysayers on call-in shows to "look in the mirror. We're the owners of this country. We don't act like the owners."⁴⁷ For Perot, as for Dewey, citizen complicity included their neglect of duties endemic in "civic ownership."⁴⁸

"[Y]ou're going to have to stay in the ring after election day," Perot often said. "I don't care how gifted [any elected official] is . . . he has got to have your organized visible support to make this system work."⁴⁹ Devoted to the "civic community,"⁵⁰ he exhorted audiences to become "buried [in] at the local, state, and national level." Otherwise, he warned, "You'll never get your schools cleaned up unless you're willing to put your shoulder to the wheel, know who's on the school board, attend PTA meetings, etc., etc."⁵¹ In Perot's eyes, a citizen, by advocating any policy, signs a contract to assume its attendant costs, whatever those might be. For example, in response to a caller's question over the Persian Gulf conflict, he argued that if the nation's priority becomes cheap oil, all Americans should bear its expense, either by personal combat service or a special war surtax.⁵²

In the "bottom-up" communitarian perspective on democracy articulated by Perot, he framed leadership in the politically unconventional terms of agency or facilitator rather than agent. As the Texan was fond of saying, "I want to do everything I can so that the American people look on me as their servant, not as their king."⁵³ Resembling Barber's conception of a "facilitative" leader who fosters creativity among the citizenry and then "vanishes," Perot was, he said, somewhat "incidental to whole process,"⁵⁴ even encouraging voters to "drop him" if a more fitting candidate emerged.⁵⁵

Consistent with his grassroots governing philosophy, Perot resisted articulating specific proposals on key campaign issues: "I don't have positions on those things. I haven't thought about them."⁵⁶ Unlike traditional candidates, Perot portrayed political leadership as soliciting creative ideas for reforming education, health care, the tax system, and other innovations that were to be "kicked around," experimented with in "pilot projects," and "de-bugged." Most salient was his proposed electronic town hall, whereby he and Congress, after brainstorming together, would present drafts to the public for feedback.⁵⁷

In this sense, Perot replicates Dewey's response to journalist Walter Lippmann's harsh indictment of the public and his contention that ordinary citizens were unwilling or incapable of participating effectively in the governing process.⁵⁸ Unlike Lippmann, Dewey conceived of expert opinion as the raw material of social inquiry and citizen participation as the discursive medium of cooperative problem solving.⁵⁹ For inquiry to have social utility, he envisioned a process of "organized intelligence," beginning at the local level through town meetings and neighborhood collectivities, which he termed the "chief agencies of nurture."⁶⁰ Inside these agencies, Dewey believed that ordinary citizens would develop their capacity for decision making by participating in all manner of experimentation, questioning, and inquiry. From this "conjoint communicated experience," citizens would begin the process of building the "Great Community," represented as a free exchange between cooperating groups.⁶¹ Dewey thus understood democracy as a reflexive form of community cooperation, a system in which expert inquiry and public debate functioned simultaneously to strengthen the foundation of citizen accountability.

Indeed, many citizens lauded Perot for subverting and reconstructing the customary parameters, methods, and tone of the political discussion. Many acknowledged that his incongruous leadership style and persona had cultivated a deepening awareness of their desires, worth, duties, and faults as citizens, of their own standards for rendering political decisions, and of the complexities of governing.⁶² Time and again, individuals in focus groups applauded Perot's refusal to treat them, in his words, "as objects to be programmed during the campaign with commercials and media events and fear messages and personal attacks."⁶³ Several praised his impious scoffing at the conventional political wisdom that raising hard issues requiring public "sacrifice" and "hard choices" was an automatic election-year taboo. To them, thorny issues like the spiraling federal deficit had been forced onto the campaign agenda only because the renegade had dared to defy the common assumption of a self-interested electorate responsive only to lofty promises—what Perot termed "Lawrence Welk music."⁶⁴ Even Perot skeptics praised his innovative infomercials, complete with detailed charts and graphs, as a welcome departure from the condescension too common in political campaigns. "I've got to admit I'm not for Ross Perot," said one California man. "But his [infomercial] presentation the other night, as simplistic as it was, of our nation's economic problems . . . I thought was outstanding. And I'm frankly getting tired of

Americans being treated like we're a bunch of idiots [who] can't figure out what's going on."⁶⁵ This yearning for respectful attention and involvement also underlay the cautious fascination many expressed for Perot's proposed "electronic town hall" and 800-number, through which citizen opinions could be solicited and registered on myriad issues. Hence, Perot both responded to citizens' desire for and encouraged them to demand what Robert L. Ivie terms a "co-agent" relationship of mutual respect.⁶⁶ Perot advised, "I'd look for a candidate that talks to you as adults; that talks to you as thinking, reasoning people and doesn't assume that he can buy your vote with your money."⁶⁷

Perhaps most significant, Perot's greatest achievement for some citizens was his capacity to foster evaluation and re-evaluation of what he termed "the thought processes" underlying sound political judgments. Because Perot's experiences differed from those of traditional politicians, some noted the Texan's ability to "see" a particular problem in different, often useful, ways. As much to the point, fresh "ordinary" perspectives encouraged them to reexamine basic premises underlying familiar solutions offered by other candidates. Repeating Perot's "folk criticism," one woman remarked:

I was not aware of the triviality . . . of the differences between Bush and Clinton in terms of the number of foreign troops . . . [a fact] which I hadn't really gleaned . . . other times I'd heard the discussion. Whereas Perot is saying, "Hey, we need to let the Europeans begin to assume more of the cost of their own defense," which kind of impressed me and perked up my ears. . . . If you are rich and you have poor cousins and they need your help, fine. But if . . . the Europeans are doing better, then they need to assume some of the responsibility.⁶⁸

Similarly, a lengthy discussion among one group centered on the features and worth of Perot's facilitative problem-solving leadership style, a style some described in terms illustrating the impact of incongruity. By playing "devil's advocate," they argued, framing political problems in "laymen's terms" rather than in political jargon, and offering unorthodox approaches to governing, some saw Perot as "educating" and "initiat[ing] us" to make more informed and reasoned political choices.⁶⁹

Without a doubt, Perot's quirky campaign and startling views offered newspaper cartoonists and television comics ample fodder for ridicule. Nonetheless, his unconventional, direct-to-the-people approach clearly helped reintegrate the disaffected into political decision making, a process both Barber and Dewey regard as vital to creating a truly participatory democracy. As Dewey argues, the promise of democracy is "faith in the capacity of the intelligence of the common man to respond with commonsense to the free play of facts and ideas."⁷⁰ Correspondingly, Burke contends that comedy provides the most useful means to effect social reforms, especially in reconciling humans to the inescapable imperfections of

bureaucratic transformations of social ideals. “If ‘comedy’ is our attitude of attitudes,” Burke writes, “then the process of processes which this comedy mediates upon is what we call the ‘bureaucratization of the imaginative,’” the inescapable imperfections or unwanted byproducts resulting from bureaucratizing any social ideal.⁷¹

Yet, to be what Perot essentially was—a political provocateur—required that he be seen as what he fundamentally was not—a presidential prospect. Put differently, the political outsider could be a disruptive force in the political system only if he were perceived to be a legitimate contender for the nation’s top executive post, a leadership position traditionally at odds with agitation. To date, analyses of provocateurs have been confined primarily to studies of social movement leaders who arouse and mobilize a movement’s constituency in its early stages, demonize and agitate the established power structure, and lay the groundwork for a movement’s necessary institutional formalization.⁷² Typically prickly independents who are impatient with details, agitators often clash with movement administrators who must manage, mediate, negotiate, and compromise. As a result of the differing functions, skills, and temperaments of agitators and bureaucrats, these leadership roles are rarely embodied in one individual. In Perot’s case, these conflicting functions and expectations presented a formidable catch-22: although Perot’s unorthodox approach to politics catapulted him into consideration and prompted his inclusion in the presidential debates, those same traits disqualified him in the eyes of many Americans.

Unplanned Incongruity

In the final analysis, the political incongruity that the Independent ticket provoked in citizens ironically worked against Perot’s presidential bid. Although perceived “competence” was a leading predictor of a likely Perot vote,⁷³ most Americans ultimately questioned his fundamental judgment following his campaign missteps. By election day, many voters had developed a deeper appreciation of necessary political leadership qualities and processes starkly at odds with the Texan and his anomalous run. Two pivotal events inadvertently were the primary catalysts for this phenomenon: first was Perot’s shocking July withdrawal from consideration; second was vice-presidential candidate James Stockdale’s disconcerting debate performance. In concert, these key incidents threw distinctions between the campaign and the qualities of the Independent ticket and those of the traditional party contenders into immediate and sharp relief.

Obviously, both startling events sorely damaged what many Perot admirers considered his most stellar qualifications: mettle, loyalty to public will, and savvy. Just as the Texan’s abrupt exit stunned his grassroots organizers, Stockdale’s unskilled debating was a jarring, transformative experience for the bulk of those

who had been entertaining the prospect of an Independent White House. Time and again, individuals perceived Perot's choice of a running mate as enacting a striking *a fortiori* argument: if he had stumbled so severely in his most critical decision to date, many distrusted his fundamental judgment in every other conceivable area. The most vehement of many conversion stories came from an Atlanta man, whose obvious shock was humorously amplified by another member:

Male 1: We have to know at least that [vice-presidential candidates] have some ideas. And that, I mean now, I mean, my vote's radic—I mean I was leaning towards, I was never really leaning towards Perot. But I would no way in the world would I vote for Ross Perot even if I liked him. Even if I believed completely in what he had to do, because James Stockdale was out of the picture. I mean he didn't know what he was talking about. And I can't vote for a man I can't trust.

Male 2: I can imagine Ross Perot being elected if Quayle and Bush and Gore and Clinton [all] would have been abducted by aliens. I can't imagine it in any other scenario.⁷⁴

For many Perot admirers who witnessed the vice presidential debate, Stockdale dramatically transformed the interpretive context for a presidential candidate. Until that moment, Perot had profited from the perception of him as a political "outsider." For example, given the media's almost exclusive focus on his unconventional campaign and his evolving status as a contender, many focus group participants reported "learning" the most about the Independent candidate after Perot's first debate outing. Moreover, they repeatedly expressed "surprise" at his confidence, scrappiness, quick wit, and overall ability to "hold his own" against politically seasoned opponents, which had surpassed their expectations for a non-politician. Significantly, those who spoke favorably about Perot after the first debate typically judged him by standards different from those applied to veteran politicians. For some, Perot's spontaneity, plain talk, sense of humor, and go-getter attitude not only compensated for his generally "vague answers" but eclipsed traditional leadership yardsticks such as overall presidential ethos, command of specific issues, and elective credentials.

As important, Stockdale's poor debate performance also converted the Independent ticket's initial rhetorical advantages into liabilities. Beyond deepening the fissures in Perot's personal credibility occasioned by his broken compact to "stay in the ring," the Stockdale fiasco also severely undermined important premises of the Perot movement. Whereas Perot's primary strength had been his status as a "one-of-us" non-politician, Stockdale vividly exposed the lie that anyone honest and reputedly intelligent had the requisite credentials to steer the country. Many termed "scary" the realization that they themselves or "anyone off the street" could

have performed as well as a man potentially a heartbeat away from the Oval Office. Although many citizens had responded to Perot's humanizing of the presidency, Stockdale, by contrast, appeared all too human, "so much so," said one man, "that he really looked like a buffoon."⁷⁵ Because to such observers Stockdale's failings so resembled parody, they served the "conservative" function Burke ascribes to humor, reaffirming a possibly latent conviction in most citizens that presidents require special skills and expertise beyond the ordinary. As Burke explains, "humor is most explosive when, besides throwing a shoe among the wheels of our machinery of judgment, it not only leaves one favored judgment completely intact, but deliberately strengthens it."⁷⁶

Indeed, in his brief televised appearance, Stockdale prompted many citizens to reassess their earlier thinking regarding the merits of Perot's folk criticism. Time and again, post-Stockdale commentary by citizens took Perot's own type of critique—such as his assessment of Clinton's gubernatorial experience in Arkansas as "irrelevant" in Washington—to a logical conclusion even more fitting to the Texan: business and government, they concluded, are diverse spheres with contrary demands requiring differing skills. Two particular criticisms were most salient: Perot's "one-trick-pony" economic theme ignored the range of complex issues government unavoidably must tackle, and his CEO mentality was antithetical to the compromising inherent in a checks-and-balance political system.

Criticism of Perot following his July withdrawal and Stockdale's poor showing also revealed key paradoxes that Branham and Pearce contend sometimes accompany reformers' efforts. Following both eye-opening revelations, many critics rejected Perot's leaderless vision of governing, illustrating the "paradox of authority" that Branham and Pearce argue faces authority figures who purportedly aim to foster independence in subordinates.⁷⁷ Obviously, disappointed Perot volunteers in July rejected his contention that he was "incidental" to a movement for reform. Similarly, after the vice-presidential debate, the intrigue of Perot's proposals for governing via electronic canvass and popular will had been supplanted by skepticism, even ridicule. Some, for example, lampooned what they perceived to be the absurdity of dial-a-policy. "I think I might invade Kuwait tomorrow," said one Detroit man, mimicking Perot's populist voice. "But if the American people want me to, I might do that. I'll set up an 800 number and you call me and tell me . . . if you want me to invade."⁷⁸ While many citizens hungered for a stronger voice and role in their own governing—a communitarian tenet—they also embraced the liberal democratic notion that the public necessarily depends upon leaders with expertise beyond its own.

Moreover, the sharp criticisms of Perot after his post-Stockdale debate appearances illustrate what Branham and Pearce term "the radical's paradox." Unconventional ideas, they explain, may be later co-opted by other, more elegantly expressive mainstream rhetors, producing an ironic result: the original messages that helped to alter a discursive environment may appear "clumsy and disingenuous" in

the restructured context those messages helped fashion.⁷⁹ Indeed, while focus group participants earlier had applauded Perot's mantra of deficit reduction for forcing the issue onto the campaign agenda, many believed that his opponents' more developed economic solutions in the last two debates made him appear naive, inept, and insincere. Not only had Perot gauged the situation falsely in the eyes of many focus group participants, but as significant was the newfound realization among these same members that they, too, had misjudged the complexity of the political context. Although some maintained that Perot had been more specific in his first debate appearance, they, like one Cincinnati woman, admitted that their own thinking had evolved more than had his rhetoric:

After the first debate, I found myself thinking, "He can accomplish these things." After the second one, I found myself thinking, . . . "[I]f he goes to Washington, it wouldn't be like he's the president of this company where he's the only [and] last word because that's not how it is there." . . . I thought he didn't fare very well [tonight] with Bush and Clinton [being] very specific and him being very general, saying . . . "The bottom line is to do it."⁸⁰

Similarly, persons in several groups speculated that the billionaire was no longer "serious" about the campaign or perhaps never had been, a theory one man, previously enamored by Perot's humor, later based in the Texan's homespun and vague approach:

I don't think Perot really considers himself a serious candidate. . . . [H]e has to realize the only way he really is going to win is if he had got [ten] a little more specific and talked about some programs . . . as opposed to this "I'm a good 'ole country boy." And so I'm kind of agreeing with more of [those who have been saying] that he just wants a soap box. . . . [H]e's a rich guy with not enough to do right now.⁸¹

As important, these two jolting events—Perot's withdrawal and Stockdale's performance—also spurred reconsideration by many, including those flirting with a Perot presidency, of the inherent value of those conventional political processes that Perot had bypassed: elective experience, the primary system, the speech-making circuit, media scrutiny, and so on. With their realization of the importance of these contexts, citizens appeared less tolerant of Perot's maverick persona and his efforts to resist conventional norms, now evaluating the Texan's behavior as unfit and even inappropriate for the "container" that contained him. Hence, campaign rituals and the accompanying media scrutiny confirmed the legitimacy of at least some of the procedural elements of the process that Perot had so scrupulously avoided. For example, whereas the media had been a favorite whipping boy of Perot and his supporters, his sudden summer exit and Stockdale's virtual anonymity before his

appearance on the debate stage led many citizens to reassess their views on media probing. In the talk among one disillusioned United We Stand footsoldier and other group members, the hunger for political change is interspersed with appreciation of the value of certain types of political permanence:

Female 1: It's an interesting way that he's conducted [his campaign]. Because what we know about Mr. Perot is what has been released by his organization. . . . had started off being a Perot supporter, going around getting signatures and then I got very disillusioned in July [when he withdrew]. . . . But I mean, I [had been] very, very pleased . . . that there was going to be a chance for change, so jump on the bandwagon and get a candidate that is going to change. Now . . . I don't feel as if I know anything about Ross Perot, except what he has shown us.

Male: [H]e won't get up there and say on television, "I'm a pretty shifty guy really." . . . But you find out from the media things like that. And I think you find out more from the media.

Female 2: But we haven't had a chance to have an in-depth look at Ross Perot because he's been in and out.⁸²

Similar concerns are echoed in citizen commentary immediately following the vice-presidential debate. Noteworthy is how the obvious incongruity of Stockdale—a man some focus group members speculated was either drunk or senile—with normal presidential expectations fueled reflection into other key aspects of the campaign:

Male 1: I mean—*during the normal political process* . . . the choice of a vice president . . . is considered an important step . . . because that is the first key decision he makes. Well, *Ross Perot didn't do the political process like the other two candidates. We never went through that phase.* And this is the first night we see this guy under any sort of *public limelight*, that I know of. . . . And I mean here is a guy that can't even give a *five-minute speech*. . . . And to me that signifies someone who can't make great choices in personnel, which [Perot] is supposedly an expert at. That makes me question [Perot's] *whole decision-making process* without a doubt.

Male 2: [Perot] is funny. . . . But *does he really have any well-thought-out policies?* Well, if he did, certainly they've got to be written down somewhere. This Stockdale guy, we know he's supposedly an intellectual. He could pick it up. He could read it. He could come here tonight and tell us about it. He didn't. So maybe that tells me that there is no well-thought-out policy, written down or even, you know, in existence anywhere. It's just cute little stories and that kind of thing in Perot's head.⁸³

Although Stockdale's debate performance all but eliminated Perot as a legitimate contender in the eyes of many, that fact paradoxically may help to illuminate Perot's respectable portion of the popular vote. While one can never know with certainty what motivates others in their casting of ballots, Burke's discussion of another humorous "anti-presidential" provocateur may be a prescient analogy to Perot:

[A]t a political convention during the preliminary balloting for presidential nomination, one bloc of delegates came forward with Will Rogers as their candidate. The move was meant as an hilarious indication that they had not yet made up their minds as to whom they would support. It said, in effect, "We like Will Rogers, and we don't like the way in which the balloting is going, and we'll show our liking for him and our uncertainties about a presidential candidate with this gesture. We can propose him without fear of our jokes being misunderstood because he is not in the presidential cluster."⁸⁴

And, indeed, some focus group citizens hinted at similar provocations. Following the last debate, several explicitly framed a possible Perot vote not as a vote for the Texan per se, but as a means to check the non-existent option "none of the above," or otherwise register their discontent with "politics as usual." In one group discussion, some expressed confidence that the electoral college process would prevent their potential Perot vote from resulting in an Independent White House.⁸⁵

Reconciliation

Although many citizens found the Independent ticket wanting, they assessed both Perot and the political system he railed against through the "charitable" comic lens that he, as political court jester, had induced. In violating what Burke terms the accepted "sense of what properly goes with what"⁸⁶ in politics, the irreverent political renegade had unsettled ingrained political attitudes, customs, and behaviors in both major parties and in the public. On the one hand, Perot's unpolished maverick persona and anomalous campaign had defied political formulas, thereby calling into question the cynical assumption of a political system impervious to change. Coupled with his outsider status and his unorthodox "hard choices" themes, the sheer audacity of his self-financed bid confounded skeptical conventional wisdom that the electoral process was forever hopelessly compromised by monied lobbyists, unbridled ambition, rigid partisanship, professional image-makers, and media agendas.

On the other hand, the Independent ticket's incongruity with key presidential expectations also worked to refurbish a tarnished faith in politics' traditional practices, rituals, and leadership qualifications, at least in the eyes of some. At minimum, Perot, as political curiosity, had lured many citizens into watching the campaign more intently; and to their surprise, many discovered what they repeatedly termed

“respect” and “admiration” for the traditional party candidates. And in evaluating these political misfits, many appeared to have developed a deeper understanding of the inescapable complexities and compromises inherent in politics, their own criteria for rendering political judgments, and most important, their individual responsibilities in governing and being governed. “I think I’m learning more about myself, at this point, than I am about the candidates,” one woman remarked. “I’m learning about what’s really important to me.”⁸⁷

Thus, as citizens commended Perot’s prowess in holding the “other [candidates] accountable,” many openly admitted that he had called them into accountability, too. As one Boston man put it, Perot’s place in history will be “the guy . . . [who] slapped the American people and said, ‘You are going to have to start taking responsibility.’ It is not so much our leaders. . . . But we have let our leaders get ‘out of sight, out of mind.’”⁸⁸ Consequently, as citizens debated the causes and remedies for political alienation that Perot’s presence had spotlighted, a striking number accepted partial culpability. Many conceded that expectations for government to fix every imaginable social ill, including moral decline, were both unrealistic and unavailing. Others confessed to the easy allure of “thirty-second soundbite” campaigns and attributed their rise partly to public inattentiveness and a taste for the quick and clever. Many theorized that Perot was free to force issues requiring citizen sacrifice on the political agenda because his indifference toward winning insulated him from the revenge of essentially self-interested voters. Many clearly realized, as Burke reminds us, that it was “the court fool . . . who introduced serious views casuistically in profiting by his ‘professional immunity.’”⁸⁹

Although by the last debate, relatively few citizens believed Perot possessed presidential fiber, the appreciation for the provocative role he had played in the campaign was a recurring theme. As a focus group participant in Washington State assessed, “To me, he’s like the perfect foil, the little piece of sand in the oyster that makes the pearl, the irritant, the catalyst [who] has succeeded in getting a lot of issues talked about in ways that I don’t ever remember hearing them talked about in elections before.”⁹⁰ Here, and in other commentary, citizens reconciled the contradictions of Perot’s candidacy by exercising Dewey’s notion of political intelligence. In fact, citizens in several groups suggested various other roles Perot might more fruitfully hold: a member of the “president’s staff,” an “executive consultant,” a “cabinet member,” even the “ultimate moderator” for the debates, given his penchant for keeping candidates focused on the “issues.” Salient traits of Perot’s comic role, the bewilderment and self-scrutiny it engendered, and the gratitude it occasioned are all evident in the sentiments of a Portsmouth, New Hampshire, man, days before the election. Although keenly aware of Perot’s poor fit for politics, he nonetheless said,

I think Perot is the conscience of this election. I really do. . . . Thank God there is somebody that can afford to stand up and speak their piece for us whether he is on the mark

or not. It's the first time in . . . my lifetime that I have seen anybody come forward. And in my case, it's cast tremendous confusion, it's disrupted, it's taken me out of my comfort zone entirely. It's been good.⁹¹

In striking ways, this citizen echoes Dewey's discussion of "conscience," which he describes as a "product and reflex" of social institutions. Properties of conscience, he writes, "reflect *criticism* of the social order as well as *approval* of it. But in this capacity, they are heralds of social order. They are significant only as they become the pivots about which turn active efforts for the *reconstruction* of social order."⁹²

CONCLUSION

The solutions to alienation proffered by contemporary political theorists, particularly by communitarians, are clear adaptations of Dewey's "creative democracy," in which each generation of citizens has a voice, a stake, but also an obligation in designing the architecture of their democratic birthright.⁹³ The bulk of such theorists invoke terms such as "conversation," "dialogue," "dialectic," "deliberation," and "facilitation" as central to an authentic democratic process. Perot's grassroots bid, his purported facilitative-leadership philosophy, and citizen responses to his disruptive presence provide the opportunity to weigh the merits and limitations of communitarian frameworks. More to the point for rhetorical scholars, Perot illuminates one significant way in which leaders may foster "dialectical" processes necessary for citizens, even the cynical and disaffected, to earn and appreciate democracy "anew."

As Burke argues, perspective by incongruity is one elixir for "the sterility and death" that cynicism toward bureaucracy can portend.⁹⁴ In disrupting ingrained habits and modes of thinking, incongruity opens space for necessary innovation and thus can revisit the imaginative. Perspective by incongruity confirms that any imaginative ideal like democracy can never be finished, thereby demanding that society "look under the hood" of its practice occasionally and "tinker with it." A political iconoclast, Perot audaciously belied the cynical conventional assumptions of a political system arthritic with bureaucratic red tape, compromised by partisan pandering, and increasingly insulated from the public it purportedly serves. Moreover, for portions of even the relatively politically contented, the oddball Texan reawakened a dormant, more fundamental democratic ideal of government as a partnership of co-agents.

At the same time, however, Perot illustrates how perspective by incongruity can itself be a paradox, nurturing at once the competing human impulses for both permanence and change. In Perot's case, unplanned incongruity functioned as a competing comic corollary to planned incongruity, juxtaposing the potential for profound political change that a Perot presidency portended against the liabilities

of such sweeping alterations. As such, Perot curbed the impulse for what Burke describes as the reformer's "surgical proclivity," the counterproductive tendency to "eliminate heart disease by eliminating hearts."⁹⁵ In tandem, planned and unplanned incongruity during the Perot bid produced a comic dialectic of sorts, "pit[ting] value against value, disposition against disposition, psychotic weighting against psychotic weighting." As is a tendency of comedy, this give-and-take not only debunked and altered impressions of certain traditions, but also simultaneously flattered and confirmed political pieties as well.⁹⁶ Indeed, election-day results intimate a dual allegiance to both permanence and change that Perot's presence may have precipitated. At the close of a campaign in which the upstart challenged citizens to become political players rather than political pawns, some 13 million citizens exercised their right to vote for the first time.⁹⁷ Yet, over half of those initiates cast ballots for the major party contestants rather than for the impious candidate who had demanded their participation.⁹⁸

Whereas scholars use such data to discount Perot's influence in the election, focus group responses from citizens uncover a complex and significant contribution of his provocative role in the campaign. Rather than treating the Independent candidate through the typical speaker-centered or agent-oriented paradigm that focuses on their personalities, their platforms, and their rhetorical strengths and limitations as they impact the candidates themselves, a more fruitful approach to elucidate Perot is to understand him essentially as an agency. Likewise, unlike other analyses that hypothesize about how concepts such as perspective by incongruity or prudential reasoning function for audiences, this study provides evidence from the public itself, confirming and describing the disruptive and constructive process of perspective by incongruity and the role it performs in the development of democratic intelligence. As citizens attested, Perot and Stockdale stimulated many to exercise standards of political judgment coincident with the wisdom of their experiences, consistent with the conception of the public good, and acutely mindful of "balancing the contradictory tendencies in any complex political situation."⁹⁹

Finally, as Burke suggests, perspective by incongruity is in itself a democratic tool. As he argues, the new understanding engendered by "misfits" such as humor, satire, irony, puns, and folksy metaphors "'democratizes' a resource confined to a choice few of our most 'royal' thinkers."¹⁰⁰ Burke's acknowledgment that incongruity makes perspectives "cheap and easy" may account for why "royal" communitarian and rhetorical theorists who valorize participatory philosophies and methods that mirror Perot's in striking respects have avoided discussion of the homespun political provocateur. As many citizens eventually admitted, Perot's naive and narrowly conceived approach to governing oversimplified the complex and sometimes competing demands of modern political life. Yet the dialectical process by which certain members of the public came to this realization supports Burke's argument that "'deterioration' from one standpoint is 'improvement' from another

standpoint. The deterioration that would go with the democratization of . . . incongruity should be matched, we hold, by a corresponding improvement in the quality of popular sophistication."¹⁰¹

Thus, critics like Rod Hart who imply that H. Ross Perot debased the body politic by convincing one fifth of the voting public that "twenty minutes of looking under the nation's hood would set the matter straight"¹⁰² are partly off the mark. For many citizens, Perot's lectures about public accountability struck a responsive chord, triggering introspection by audiences concerning the public's complicity in a flawed political system many so roundly criticized. As one Tempe, Arizona, woman so succinctly put it, "[W]e can't just sit back and collect our paychecks . . . and say, 'Well, that's the government's problem.' We're the government, and I think [Perot's] goal is to make the people realize . . . that we have to take an active role."¹⁰³ Indeed, looking under the hood of favorable poll ratings and vote counts and listening to the public's voices reveal that the Independent ticket made many citizens realize that, although the old clunker of a political system needed repair, it was still fairly reliable. Thus, most were not yet willing to risk trading it in for a whole new model.

NOTES

1. Roderick P. Hart, *Seducing America: How Television Charms the Modern Voter* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), 168.
2. Henry C. Kenske and Lee Sigelman, "Perot: Mass Audience Effects," paper presented at the annual meeting of the Speech Communication Association, November 1994, New Orleans, La., 24.
3. Pointing to the significance of Perot's media use, journalist Robin Toner posits that "Perot helped chart the existence of a parallel universe in political campaigns: Larry King, Phil Donahue, infomercials, morning talk. Other politicians had used them before, but none had used them . . . as an alternative to the normal round of primaries, political meetings, and conventions." See Robin Toner, "Political Metamorphoses," *New York Times*, November 3, 1992, A10. Referencing Perot's television advertising in particular, Patrick Devlin noted that the Texan "premiered an unprecedented mode," owing at least in part to the presence, tone, and popularity of Perot's lengthy, informational, and no-frills approach. According to Devlin, Perot "revitalized [a] format that has been little used since 1972," one that attracted as many as an estimated 30 million viewers for his first half-hour program and almost nine million viewers on average for both his one-hour and half-hour formats aired throughout his campaign. See Patrick Devlin, "Contrasts in Presidential Campaign Commercials of 1992," *American Behavioral Scientist* 37 (1993):272-91. As evidence of citizen response, a Harris Organization national sample of registered voters conducted in October 1992 reported that citizens rated Perot's televised political commercials as "more effective" than either Bush's or Clinton's ads. See Howard W. Odum Institute for Research in Social Science, "Public Opinion Poll Question Database," Harris study no. 921106, October 1992, accessed August 19, 2000, available from <http://www.irss.unc.edu/data_archive/pollsearch.html>. Additionally, a majority of citizens in a *Times Mirror* nationwide poll rated Perot's commercials as "most informative." Results reported in William Schneider, "When Issues, Not Personalities, Rule," *The National Journal*, December 5, 1992, 2814.

4. In an editorial published just prior to Perot's official exclusion from the 1996 presidential debates, *The New York Times* cautioned the members of the Commission on Presidential Debates against shielding the two major parties as well as the nation's citizens from Perot's spirited independent challenge. See "Fixing the Presidential Debates," *New York Times*, September 18, 1996, 20. Similarly, in an article written for the *Christian Science Monitor*, political analyst Alex Abrams claimed that Perot's absence would prove "detrimental to the democratic process" and "devastating to the political voice" of those voters brought back into the process through Perot's efforts in 1992. See Alex Abrams, "Under-30s Cast a Vote for Perot," *Christian Science Monitor*, October 8, 1996, 18. Citizens themselves expressed these same sentiments in a variety of forums. For example, in one of the Debate-Watch focus groups conducted on-site and immediately following the 1996 Hartford debate, several Connecticut residents expressed their displeasure with the commission's decision and argued that, without Perot's participation, the debate proved less relevant to their political interests.
5. Kenneth Burke, *Attitudes Toward History*, 3d ed. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), 166–75.
6. Burke, *Attitudes Toward History*, 225–26; 229.
7. Raymie E. McKerrow, "Critical Rhetoric: Theory and Praxis," *Communication Monographs* 56 (1989): 101.
8. See, for example, Robert Hariman and Francis A. Beer, "What Would Be Prudent? Forms of Reasoning in World Politics," *Rhetoric & Public Affairs* 1 (1998): 299–330; Herbert W. Simons, "Judging a Policy Proposal by the Company It Keeps: The Gore-Perot NAFTA Debate," *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 82 (1996): 274–87; Bonnie J. Dow and Mari Boor Tonn, "'Feminine Style' and Political Judgment in the Rhetoric of Ann Richards," *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 79 (1993): 286–302.
9. Some of these focus groups were designed to consider only the merit of debates generally in servicing citizen needs for political decision making; most, however, were conducted after each of the debates to gauge whether and how each specific match-up influenced individual learning and deliberation about candidates. The bulk of this analysis relies upon the 48 focus groups of 500 citizens who watched the actual debates. This larger study was split equally among genders and participants identified as 32% Republicans, 39% Democrats, and 29% Independents or with no party affiliation. See Diana B. Carlin and Mitchell S. McKinney, *The 1992 Presidential Debates in Focus* (Westport, Conn.: Praeger, 1994), 21–35, for further information on demographic profiles, as well as design and implementation of the focus group study. Although our conclusions regarding citizen response to the Perot campaign are based on the commission's extensive focus group study following the presidential and vice-presidential debates, we acknowledge the important work of Marion R. Just, et al., *Crosstalk: Citizens, Candidates, and the Media in a Presidential Campaign* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 18–39. In the most comprehensive examination of citizen response to date, Just and her coauthors employed a variety of methods—including in-depth interviews, public opinion surveys, and focus group analyses—to assess the public's cognitive construction of the candidates throughout the 1992 presidential election.
10. Polling results reported in Mark P. Moore, "From a Government of the People, To a People of the Government: Irony as Rhetorical Strategy in Presidential Campaigns," *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 82 (1996): 22.
11. For an in-depth discussion of demographic and attitudinal profiles of the Perot voter, see Lewis Peirce, Casey McCracken, and Roger Hunt, "Politics: Who Cares?" *American Demographics* 16 (1994): 20–27; Albert J. Menendez, *The Perot Voters and the Future of American Politics* (New York: Prometheus Books, 1996); Rhodes Cook, "'92 Voter Turnout: Apathy Stymied," *Congressional*

- Quarterly Weekly Report*, May 15, 1993, 1258; Rhodes Cook, "Hill Finds It Cannot Ignore Perot's Lingering Presence," *Congressional Quarterly Weekly Report*, October 2, 1993, 1271–76.
12. See Jean Bethke Elstain, *Democracy on Trial* (New York: Basic Books, 1995); Todd Gitlin, *The Twilight of Common Dreams: Why America Is Wracked by Culture Wars* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 1995); Chantal Mouffe, *The Return of the Political* (New York: Verso, 1993); Michael J. Sandel, *Democracy's Discontent: America in Search of a Public Philosophy* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1996); Michael Lerner, *The Politics of Meaning: Restoring Hope and Possibility in an Age of Cynicism* (Reading, Mass.: Addison-Wesley, 1996); Robert Bellah, et al., *Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life* (New York: Harper and Row, 1985); Alan Wolfe, *Marginalized in the Middle* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996).
 13. Cheney-Spokane, Washington, citizens, focus group transcript, moderator Jeff Stafford, October 11, 1992, 23.
 14. Michael Huspek and Kathleen E. Kendall, "On Withholding Political Voice: An Analysis of the Political Vocabulary of a 'Non-political' Speech Community," *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 77 (1991):1–19; Tarla Rai Peterson and Cristi Choat Horton, "Rooted in the Soil: How Understanding of Perspectives of Landowners Can Enhance the Management of Environmental Disputes," *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 81 (1995):139–66.
 15. Peterson and Horton, "Rooted in the Soil," 141.
 16. Robert J. Branham and W. Barnett Pearce, "Between Text and Context: Toward a Rhetoric of Contextual Reconstruction," *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 71 (1985):29.
 17. Huspek and Kendall, "On Withholding Political Voice," 1.
 18. John J. Stuhr, *Philosophy and the Reconstruction of Culture: Pragmatic Essays After Dewey* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1993), 43, 49. As Stuhr explains, Dewey's democratic conviction implies not simply devotion to the twin principles of citizenship—equal opportunity and obligation—but also to an abiding faith in human imagination, intelligence, and will.
 19. John Dewey, *The Public and Its Problems* (Athens, Ohio: Swallow Press, 1954), 203.
 20. Dewey, *The Public and Its Problems*, 207.
 21. Dewey, *The Public and Its Problems*, 84, 144–48.
 22. Emphasis added. Benjamin R. Barber, *A Passion for Democracy: American Essays* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1998), 100.
 23. Benjamin R. Barber, *Strong Democracy: Participatory Politics for a New Age* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), 267–79; Benjamin R. Barber, *A Place for Us: How to Make Society Civil and Democracy Strong* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1998), 69–114.
 24. Alan Brinkley, "What's Wrong with American Political Leadership?" *Wilson Quarterly* 18 (1994): 52–53.
 25. Brinkley "What's Wrong," 54.
 26. Dewey, *The Public and Its Problems*, 184.
 27. Brinkley "What's Wrong," 54.
 28. Branham and Pearce, "Between Text and Context," 20–22.
 29. Kenneth Burke, *A Grammar of Motives* (1945; reprint, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1969), 18.
 30. Peter Ajemian, "Did the Media Serve Us Well? A Critic's View of Coverage of Ross Perot's 1992 Presidential Campaign," occasional paper by The John W. McCormack Institute of Public Affairs, December 1995, 7–9; 10–20.

31. See Burke, *A Grammar of Motives*, 3–9. Both acts and agents, as Burke explains, require scenes that “contain” them. If rhetorical context functions as a “fit container,” “the thing contained” should reflect qualities consistent with the scene. Continuity between the scene, act, and agent may be disrupted, however, when a comic such as Perot deliberately sets these elements at odds with each other and by creating a state of incongruity.
32. H. Ross Perot, interview transcript, “Billionaire Businessman H. Ross Perot Discusses the Elections, the Recession and Japan,” *Donahue*, Multimedia Entertainment, New York, March 24, 1992, 6.
33. Burke, *Attitudes Toward History*, 173.
34. Kenneth Burke, *Permanence and Change: An Anatomy of Purpose*, 3d ed. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), 7–11.
35. Emphasis added. “Presidential Debate,” Washington University, Washington, D.C., transcript, October 11, 1992, News Transcripts Inc., 10–11.
36. “Presidential Debate,” Washington University, 8, 25.
37. Burke, *Attitudes Toward History*, 39–44.
38. Marshall McLuhan and Quentin Fiore, *Medium is the Massage* (New York: Random House, 1967), 92.
39. “Presidential Debate,” Washington University, 25–26.
40. Deborah Tannen, *Talking Voices* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 98–133.
41. Burke, *Attitudes Toward History*, 172.
42. “Presidential Debate,” Washington University, 29.
43. Burke, *Permanence and Change*, 38–49.
44. See presidential debate transcripts: “Presidential Debate,” Washington University, 3; “Presidential Debate,” University of Richmond, Richmond, Virginia, transcript, October 15, 1992, News Transcripts Inc., 1; “Presidential Debate,” Michigan State University, East Lansing, Michigan, transcript, October 19, 1992, News Transcripts Inc., 33.
45. H. Ross Perot, interview transcript, *Today*, National Broadcasting Company, New York, June 11, 1992, 20.
46. Perot, interview transcript, *Today*, 28.
47. H. Ross Perot, interview transcript, “Straight Talk from H. Ross Perot,” *Larry King Live*, Cable News Network, Washington, D.C., February 20, 1992, 4; Perot, interview transcript, “Billionaire Businessman,” 5.
48. Dewey, *The Public and Its Problems*, 148.
49. Perot, interview transcript, “Straight Talk,” 12.
50. Dewey, *The Public and Its Problems*, 148; Barber, *Strong Democracy*, 128–29, 183–85.
51. Perot, interview transcript, “Straight Talk,” 12.
52. Perot, interview transcript, “Billionaire Businessman,” 7; Perot, interview transcript, *Today*, 7.
53. H. Ross Perot, interview transcript, “Meet the Perots,” *20/20*, American Broadcasting Company, New York, May 29, 1992, 9.
54. Barber, *A Passion for Democracy*, 100; H. Ross Perot, interview transcript, “H. Ross Perot,” *Larry King Live*, Cable News Network, Washington, D.C., June 24, 1992, 2.
55. Perot, interview transcript, “Billionaire Businessman,” 2.
56. H. Ross Perot, interview transcript, “Texas Billionaire H. Ross Perot,” *Evans and Novak*, Cable News Network, Washington, D.C., April 11, 1992, 8.
57. Perot, interview transcript, “Meet the Perots,” 6–7.

58. Both Dewey and Lippmann refined their perspectives on public governance in their well-publicized debate. In essence, Lippmann favored a model of communicative consultation, a design premised on the notion that a network of social science intelligence bureaus would guide governing elites rather than undertake the task of educating the public. See Walter Lippmann, *Public Opinion* (New York: Free Press, 1965), 125–60; Walter Lippmann, *The Phantom Public* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1925), 72–74; Sue Davis, *American Political Thought: Four Hundred Years of Ideas and Ideologies* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice Hall, 1996), 332–33.
59. See Debra Morris and Ian Shapiro, ed. and comp., *John Dewey: The Political Writings* (Indianapolis: Hackett Press, 1993), xii–xvi. Morris and Shapiro acknowledge that scholars have long disputed the degree of importance Dewey accords to expert opinion or “technocratic expertise” in framing the communication process. They contend, however, that Dewey sought to justify the principle of an expanded democracy by combining the objectives of public deliberation with community ends. In Dewey’s words (quoted in Morris and Shapiro, *John Dewey*, 208–09), “Inquiry, indeed, is a work which devolves upon experts. But their expertness is not shown in framing and executing policies, but in discovering and making known the facts upon which the former depend. . . . It is not necessary that the many should have the knowledge and skill to carry on the needed investigations; what is required is that they have the ability to judge of the bearing of the knowledge supplied by others upon common concerns.”
60. Dewey, *The Public and Its Problems*, 211.
61. Dewey, *The Public and Its Problems*, 142, 173–84.
62. As Dow and Tonn argue in their analysis of the rhetoric of former Texas Governor Ann Richards, rhetors who acknowledge the value of audience members’ life experiences, and help them to use observations to render political judgments, are particularly appealing for the politically disaffected. See Dow and Tonn, “Feminine Style,” 288–91.
63. “Presidential Debate,” Washington University, 1.
64. “Presidential Debate,” Washington University, 9.
65. Sacramento, California, citizens, focus group transcript, moderator Sally Perkins, October 11, 1992, 2.
66. Robert L. Ivie, “Democratic Deliberation in a Rhetorical Republic,” *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 84 (1998): 499.
67. Perot, interview transcript, “Straight Talk,” 11.
68. St. Louis, Missouri, citizens, focus group transcript, moderator Diana Carlin, October 11, 1992, 2.
69. Tempe, Arizona, citizens [females], focus group transcript, moderator Michael Mayer, October 12, 1992, 8, 11.
70. Dewey, *The Political Writings*, 242.
71. Burke, *Attitudes Toward History*, preface, n.p.
72. See, for example, the examinations cited in Charles J. Stewart, Craig Allen Smith, and Robert E. Denton, Jr., *Persuasion and Social Movements*, 2d ed. (Prospect Heights, Ill.: Waveland Press, 1989).
73. Michael Pfau and William R. Eveland, Jr., “Debates Versus Other Communication Sources: The Pattern of Information and Influence,” in *The 1992 Presidential Debates in Focus*, ed. Diana B. Carlin and Mitchell S. McKinney (Westport, Conn.: Praeger Press, 1994), 169.
74. Atlanta, Georgia, citizens, focus group transcript, moderator Carol Winkler, October 13, 1992, 46–47.
75. Syracuse, New York, citizens, focus group transcript, moderator Craig Dudzacak, October 11, 1992, 5.
76. Burke, *Permanence and Change*, 112.
77. Branham and Pearce, “Between Text and Context,” 26.

78. Detroit, Michigan, citizens, focus group transcript, moderator Jack Kay, October 15, 1992, 26.
79. Branham and Pearce, "Between Text and Context," 23–24, 29.
80. Cincinnati, Ohio, citizens, focus group transcript, moderator Steve Depoe, October 15, 1992, 8.
81. Cheney-Spokane, Washington, citizens [male], focus group transcript, moderator Jeff Stafford, October 15, 1992, 7.
82. Syracuse, New York, citizens, focus group transcript, 14.
83. Emphasis added. Atlanta, Georgia, citizens, focus group transcript, 11–12.
84. Burke, *Attitudes Toward History*, 233.
85. Cincinnati, Ohio, citizens, focus group transcript, 8–12.
86. Kenneth Burke, *Permanence and Change*, 69, 74–76.
87. Sioux Falls, South Dakota, citizens, focus group transcript, moderator Michael Pfau, October 19, 1992, 13.
88. Boston, Massachusetts, citizens, focus group transcript, moderator Matt Sobnosky, October 19, 1992, 7.
89. Burke, *Attitudes Toward History*, 230.
90. Cheney-Spokane, Washington, citizens [female], focus group transcript, moderator Jeff Stafford, October 15, 1992, 3. The oyster and pearl metaphor employed by the focus group participant appears to have been borrowed from Perot himself, as the metaphor is prevalent in a variety of his speeches as well as in his television interviews. See, for example, "Perot Offers Congratulations to Governor Clinton," transcript no. 85–28, CNN, November 3, 1992, online database, Lexis-Nexis; "Televised Conversation with Ross Perot: Business Success, Leadership and his Life," Federal News Service, October 22, 1992, online database, Lexis-Nexis; "Larry King Live," transcript no. 686, CNN, October 29, 1992, online database, Lexis-Nexis.
91. Portsmouth, New Hampshire, citizens, focus group transcript, moderator Mark Kuhn, October 19, 1992, 8.
92. Emphasis added. Dewey, *The Political Writings*, 202–03.
93. Dewey, *The Political Writings*, 240–45.
94. Burke, *Attitudes Toward History*, 246.
95. Kenneth Burke, *Language as Symbolic Action: Essays on Life, Literature, and Method* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1966), 447.
96. Burke, *Permanence and Change*, 112.
97. Cook, "'92 Voter Turnout," 1258.
98. Menendez, *The Perot Voters*, 214.
99. Robert Hariman, "Prudence and Presidential Leadership," paper presented at the 5th Annual Texas A&M Conference on Presidential Rhetoric, March 1999, College Station, Texas, 4.
100. Burke, *Attitudes Toward History*, 229.
101. Burke, *Attitudes Toward History*, 229.
102. Hart, *Seducing America*, 168.
103. Tempe, Arizona, citizens [females], focus group transcript, 11.