



1996 Party Leadership and Presidential Selection Survey Results



The Reform Party in 1996: A Report to Respondents

This is a report on our continuing study of American political parties and political change in the United States. This report focuses on the Reform Party and its future. We hope you find it of interest. The success of this project and our ability to understand the remarkable changes in American politics over the past 18 years is entirely due to the willingness of you and other participants in the political process to complete our surveys. We are sincerely grateful.

In the near future we will have all four of the reports we have sent available on a web-page at morton.wm.edu/~rbrapo, where we will also post other interesting results from time to time.

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In a country where only two political parties — the Democrats and Republicans — have dominated electoral politics since the Civil War, any electoral headway by a third party or candidate is a noteworthy event. Setting aside Teddy Roosevelt's Bull Moose Party effort, Perot's 18.9% of the popular vote in 1992 was the largest third party popular vote since the Civil War. By running again in 1996 and winning 8.4% of the vote, Perot became the first third party candidate to win more than 5% of the vote in successive elections since the Civil War. Even his diminished vote in 1996 was surpassed by only three other candidates in the last hundred years. Numbers aside, what was also noteworthy about Perot's 1996 presidential bid was that, whereas in 1992 he ran as an independent, in 1996 he was the nominee of the new Reform Party. Moreover, he proved to the American electorate that his challenge to the major parties was still relevant four years later. In this report to respondents we examine the prospects of the Reform Party for becoming an enduring part of the U.S. political system.

The basis of our analysis for this report are national samples of contributors to the Democratic, Republican, and Reform parties. The two major-party samples were drawn from databases of contributors to the Republican and Democratic national committees in late 1994 and 1995, and the Reform Party sample in drawn from the 1996 campaign contributors.¹

Because of the lack of long-term success among American third parties, evaluating the Reform Party's prospects beyond 1996 is very difficult. However, it is clear that for the party to achieve long-term success, it must develop an ongoing basis of support that transcends any individual leader. The basis of this support could be distinctive ideological positioning, specific issue positions or distinctive issue priorities. This last possibility is important because during times of partisan change — times during which third

parties are especially likely to emerge — new issue agendas may be important catalysts in the development of challenges to the major parties. If issues are to be a catalyst for a new party, however, there usually must be agreement on both position and priority.

In this report we focus on ideology, issue positions, and activism levels of poten-

tial activists from the three parties. The Reform Party is at an early stage of development. Our presumption is that the attitudes, perceptions, and behaviors of the Democratic and Republican parties' activist bases have something to do with their endurance, and that they are reflective of the end state to be expected of a successful party. Therefore, this report will assess the state of the Reform Party by comparing it with the two established parties.

For the established parties our expectations are fairly clear:

1. *Ideology.* We expect to find significant polarization between the parties and significant unity within the parties on liberalism/conservatism.
2. *Issues.* We also expect to find significant polarization between the parties and significant unity within the parties on a wide range of issues, as well as intra-party agreement on issue priorities.
3. *Activism.* We should find high levels of partisan activity on behalf of the parties and candidates.

Our expectations about the Reform Party are less clear. To the degree that the Reform Party activists resemble those of the Democratic and Republican parties on these dimensions, we take it as evidence of potential endurance in the political system. For example, if the Reform Party were simply an amalgam of disaffected Democrats and Republicans without any distinctive issue agenda beyond alienation from both major parties, we should find no priorities or positions distinguishable from the major parties. On the other hand, if the Reform Party constituency has a unique issue agenda, we should find that supporters do not merely fall half-way between the major parties, but stake out distinctive positions. Nevertheless, it is not necessary that the

Reform Party shows unity and distinctiveness on all, or even as many, issues as do the major parties. What is needed is a core of distinctive issues around which the party can build a distinctive agenda. Supporters should also be aware of the party's distinctiveness and, therefore, be able to place their party and candidates consistently on these issues. Differentiation from the major parties in issue salience and/or candidate and party placement would indicate that the Reform Party is acquiring a distinctive identity.

Liberalism/Conservatism

We begin our analysis of the three parties by examining how respondents of each party placed themselves, their parties and their parties' presidential nominee on a traditional seven-point liberal-conservative scale. Such a scale, while very general, indicates the divisions among the parties on a dimension of conflict that has characterized American politics since the Great Depression. Figure 1 presents the ideological locations of the three potential activist samples and activists' perceptions of their own party's and candidate's location.

The Democratic National Committee contributor sample was clearly to the left of center and saw the Democratic party as being only slightly less liberal. The Democratic sample perceived Bill Clinton as more moderate than his party. On the other hand, Republicans saw themselves as a bit more extreme on the right than the Democrats were on the left, and like the Democrats they perceived their party and its nominee as slightly more moderate than themselves. Reform Party respondents saw themselves as moderately conservative on the left-right scale and placed the Reform Party and Ross Perot slightly to their right. These placements locate the party and its candidate to the left of the Republican Party and just to the left of Bob Dole.

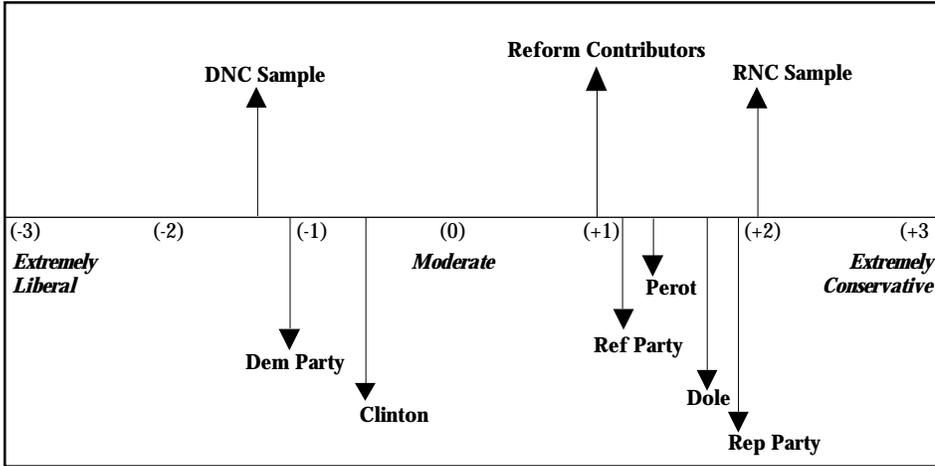
The general conclusion from Figure 1 is that although the Reform Party and Ross Perot were between the two extremes defined by the Democratic and Republican parties, they offered neither a distinctively extreme nor a centrist alternative. Indeed, on ideological grounds alone, the Reform alternative was very close to the Republicans, whose brand of conservatism in 1996 did not appear to leave much room for the Reform Party to carve out a distinct constituency.

Issue Opinions

It is possible that the sorts of issue appeals Perot offered defined an alternative agenda not readily visible in the simple left-right picture in Figure 1. There is no necessity that the same left-

¹The data for this report result from surveys of Reform, Democratic, and Republican activists in 1996. The number of cases and response rates for each party's sample were as follows: Reform Party 1470 responses (59.5%), Democratic Party 667 (46.4%), and Republican Party 789 returned surveys (39.9%). We would like to acknowledge support from the National Science Foundation and assistance from the three parties.

Figure 1. Ideological Placements of the Three Parties, Candidates, and Activist Samples



Source: Authors' 1996 potential party activist surveys. Placements are based on mean self-placement for potential activist samples, and mean perceived location for party and candidate by respondents in that party.

right dimension which separates Democrats from Republicans should reliably separate Reform Party members from the major parties. Rather, it may be that Perot supporters distinguish themselves from the major parties on a set of issues that do not fit with the traditional liberal-conservative cleavage. To explore the possibility that issues rather than ideological identification defined a distinct Reform Party constituency, we examined the issue opinions on several issue questions asked of all three samples.

on foreign imports and less U. S. foreign involvement) and positive values indicate more conservative positions.

Not surprisingly, the results for the traditional liberal-conservative issues mirror those for liberal-conservative placement: Democrats differed relatively sharply from Republicans, and Reform respondents in every case placed themselves between the average opinion of activists in the established parties.

Table 1. Mean Issue Opinions by Potential Activist Sample

	DNC	RNC	Reform Party
<i>Traditional Liberal-Conservative Issues</i>			
Affirmative Action Programs	-1.19	2.05	1.42
Shift More Domestic Programs to States	-1.00	2.41	1.88
National Health Insurance	-1.87	2.10	0.14
Increase Government Control of Firearms	-2.40	0.84	0.32
Constitutional Amendment Limiting Abortion	-2.36	0.11	-1.01
<i>Reform Issues</i>			
Term Limits	-0.60	1.48	2.10
Reduce Deficit, Increase Taxes	-0.72	-0.49	-0.89
Reduce Deficit, Cut Programs	-0.40	2.22	1.98
<i>Economic Nationalism</i>			
Decreased U.S. Foreign Involvement	-1.12	0.88	1.30
Stricter Limit on Number of Immigrants	-0.11	1.80	2.04
Limit Foreign Imports	-0.27	-0.01	1.56

Source: Authors' 1996 potential party activist surveys.

In Table 1 we divide the issue items included on the surveys into three broad categories: *traditional liberal-conservative issues* that relate more or less directly to the enduring ideological axis of partisan conflict in American politics; *economic nationalism issues* that tap the underlying view that resources should be more concentrated at home rather than abroad, and that the government needs to protect American workers both from unfair foreign competition and low paid immigrant workers; and *reform issues* that include proposals to restructure American politics by limiting terms of office holders and balancing the budget. Respondents were asked how strongly they favored or opposed the above issues, and their average responses are presented in Table 1 where negative values indicate more liberal positions (including less support for limiting immigrants, less support for limitations

Observers of the Perot movement in 1992 and 1996 might expect that balancing the federal budget, the linchpin of the Perot candidacies in both years, would most sharply distinguish Reform Party supporters from the Democrats and Republicans. However, balancing the budget has also been an important Republican issue for the last half-century, and even though Perot's 1992 campaign was successful in calling attention to the deficit problem, Republicans found little difficulty in accommodating themselves to a tough budget position in the ensuing four years. Even the Democrats under Clinton tried to show their commitment to budget balancing. We included two items designed to measure attitudes about balancing the Federal budget by requiring respondents to accept the tradeoffs implied by that goal: raising taxes and cutting back on programs.

Although there was substantial agreement across all three parties on balancing the budget, when the two deficit items were combined, it was clear that activists in the Reform Party were closer to Republicans on the deficit issue than they were to Democrats. Among both Republicans and Reformers, the dominant position was a "deficit-hawk" willingness to reduce the deficit both by cutting government programs and by increasing taxes. About 63% of Republicans were deficit-hawks in this sense, while 68% of Reform contributors were willing to cut programs and raise taxes to reduce the federal deficit. In contrast, only 35% of Democrats were deficit hawks, with the modal position (38%) preferring to raise taxes without cutting programs. Reform activists were clearly closer to Republicans on the deficit than they were to the Democrats, but they were only slightly more extreme than the Republicans. Overall, the deficit issue exemplifies the difficulty a third party faces trying to be distinctive on a popular issue.

On issues more distinctive (and equally central) to the Perot/Reform agenda in 1996, however, a different pattern emerges. On limiting immigration, term limits, placing limits on foreign imports to protect American jobs, and decreasing U. S. foreign involvement, Reform respondents were more extreme than either of the other parties, and in all cases the differences between the major parties were muted. For example, on the question of placing limits on foreign imports in order to protect American jobs, Democrats and Republicans were almost identical in their mild opposition, while Reformers were overwhelmingly in support of such restrictions. Furthermore, the other two economic nationalism issues and term limits maintain a similar (if less dramatic) pattern in

Table 2. Percent Breakdown for Most Important Issue by Potential Activist Sample.

	DNC	RNC	Reform Party
<i>Economic Nationalism</i>			
Decreased U.S. Foreign Involvement	2.9	2.8	4.6
Stricter Limit on Number of Immigrants	3.4	7.8	12.5
Limit Foreign Imports	2.0	1.8	9.7
<i>Reform Issues</i>			
Term Limits	2.9	3.9	7.9
Reduce Deficit, Increase Taxes	14.4	8.4	13.6
Reduce Deficit, Cut Programs	7.3	37.5	27.4
<i>Traditional Liberal-Conservative Issues</i>			
Affirmative Action Programs	5.6	3.1	2.0
Shift More Domestic Programs to States	2.6	12.2	3.3
National Health Insurance	28.4	3.3	5.7
Increase Government Control of Firearms	11.4	4.0	4.3
Constitutional Amendment Limiting Abortion	14.0	12.1	6.4
Not Sure	5.1	3.1	2.7

Source: Authors' 1996 potential party activist surveys.

which major party polarization is relatively low, and the Reform Party is more distinctive.

None of these four issues corresponds neatly with the traditional left-right continuum, and on each there is relatively little historical difference between the Democratic and Republican parties. All of them, however, help distinguish the Reform position from both of the major parties. As opposed to our findings on the general left-right continuum, it is clear that Reform Party activists do not simply fall between the major parties in an undifferentiated way.

more than a third of Republicans, barely attract a fifth of Reform Party respondents. In fact, the five traditional issues constitute five of the six least important issues for Reform Party respondents. In essence, traditional issues concern the Democrats, deficit reduction and traditional issues concern Republicans, and economic nationalism and reform issues concern Reform Party supporters.

On the two liberal-conservative issues, affirmative action and abortion, the Reform Party and Perot were both placed by Reform activists between the placements of the major parties and their nominees by each party's activist base.

On the two issues closer to the Reform agenda, deficit reduction and, in particular, foreign involvement, Reform respondents see their party as more extreme and distinctive than do either Democratic or Republican supporters see their respective party. The perceptual data, therefore, reinforce our view that Reform Party activists understood that their party was most distant from either of the major parties on the foreign involvement item, which is part of the "economic nationalism" cluster of issues.

Our assessment of activists' perceptions would be incomplete without an account of how much uncertainty there was in each party about party and candidate placement. Here the results are not as positive for the Reform Party. Even on those issues where the Perot and the Reform Party seem to have staked out unambiguous issue positions, large percentages of the Reform Party sample were unable to place the party.

On every item we examined, including the issues respondents picked as most important, substantial proportions of Reform Party respondents could not place their party. For example, on reducing the deficit by cutting programs, 13.2% were unable to place the party. In contrast, there was much less confusion among Democratic and Republican respondents about their respective party. This lack of information is not attributable to a general inability of Reform Party contributors to place the parties on issues. Reform Party respondents were actually better able to place both the Democratic and Republican parties than they were their own

Table 3. Mean Perceptions of Party and Nominee by Party Sample

		DNC	RNC	Reform Party
Affirmative action	Candidate	-1.65	1.42	1.05
	Party	-1.48	1.59	1.14
Reduce deficit by cutting programs	Candidate	-.02	1.86	2.28
	Party	-.31	1.80	2.12
Abortion	Candidate	-2.15	1.06	-.42
	Party	-1.83	1.12	-.43
Reduced foreign involvement	Candidate	-1.52	.22	1.16
	Party	-1.09	.41	1.22

Source: Authors' 1996 potential party activist surveys.

Instead, these issues may define an alternative agenda that the Reform Party is well positioned to articulate.

The cluster of issues including limiting U.S. foreign involvement militarily and economically, while limiting foreign imports and immigrants is one that has not found a congenial home in either major party. In both 1992 and 1996 Pat Buchanan tried to promote such sentiments in the Republican Party, with only limited success. At present, Richard Gephardt is espousing support for parts of this agenda as well, in hopes of capturing the Democratic nomination in 2000. But based upon our examination there is no clear consensus in either major party. On the other hand, the Reform Party shows much greater unity on each, and in each case supporters strongly support the economic nationalist perspective. Support for term limits is also an issue that shows some promise for the Reform Party. While Republicans have supported limiting terms since the issue reached the political agenda, such support has lessened in the wake of the 1994 elections, while Reform activists remain committed and unified on this item.

However, as discussed earlier, it is not just positions, but priorities, which mold party appeals. In addition to opinions on issues, we also asked respondents to indicate which of the issue items was most important to them. The results reinforce the issue analysis above. Although deficit reduction is the most important issue to the Perot supporters (albeit to a slightly lesser degree than for the Republicans), it is economic nationalism issues and term limits that distinguish the Reform Party from the major parties (see Table 2 on previous page). More than one in three Reform Party respondents pick one of these four issues as "most important," compared with fewer than one in six Republicans and one in nine Democrats. Limiting foreign imports, which trails only the deficit and limiting immigrants in importance for the Reform Party sample, is the single least important issue for both Democratic and Republican contributors.

On the other hand, traditional liberal-conservative issues, one of which is picked as most important by more than 60% of Democrats, and

Placement of Parties and Candidates

Even though Reform Party supporters occupy a distinctive position on some issues, the question remains whether the party and its candidates will be seen as occupying distinctive

Table 4. Percent Not Sure of Candidate or Party Position on Ideology and Issue Placement Items, by Party.

		DNC	RNC	Reform Party
Liberal-Conservative item	Candidate	2.5	.3	6.2
	Party	2.2	1.6	13.1
Most important issue	Candidate	5.4	4.8	12.2
	Party	6.1	4.7	17.2
Affirmative action	Candidate	3.3	4.1	20.7
	Party	4.4	4.1	29.0
Reducing deficit/programs	Candidate	3.5	1.7	6.8
	Party	4.2	1.9	13.2
Abortion	Candidate	4.2	9.1	33.1
	Party	4.8	7.8	41.1
Reduced foreign involvement	Candidate	6.8	6.0	16.2
	Party	10.4	8.6	26.2

Source: Authors' 1996 potential party activist surveys.

positions similar to those of the activists (see Table 3). After all, the Reform Party is relatively new, and supporters may be uninformed about it. Once again we use the Democratic and Republican Party samples as comparison groups. We examined perceptions of each sample's candidate and party on four issues: affirmative action, controlling the deficit by cutting programs, abortion, and decreasing US involvement abroad. Again, more negative responses in Table 3 indicate the more liberal position on the above issues and positive responses indicate the more conservative position.

Our findings on activists' placement of candidates and parties are consistent with our findings on activists' self-placements on issues.

party. Reform activists were consistently better able to place Perot than their party, but even here their levels of uncertainty were consistently greater than the comparable results among Democrats and Republicans. These levels of uncertainty are high enough to raise questions about the visibility of the party and its candidate to its own most attentive constituency, even on highly salient issues.

Activism

We asked respondents a battery of questions about activities in their party's Presidential race, as indicated by the items included in Table 5. The most common form of activity in all three parties was trying to persuade others to support the party's candidate. Significant proportions of activists also canvassed for their candidate, wrote letters, or engaged in at least one other campaign activity. Perhaps the most striking finding in Table 5 is that the Reform sample was significantly more involved in the 1996 Presidential campaign than were the Democratic and Republican samples.

Table 5. Percent Active in Presidential Campaign by Party.

Activity	RNC	DNC	Reform Sample
Active in any way other than contributing	53.1%	47.5%	62.1%
Convince others to support candidate	50.4%	43.2%	59.9%
Clerical work for campaign	1.9%	2.3%	3.8%
Telephone or door-to-door canvassing	5.6%	7.1%	9.0%
Wrote letters to magazine or newspaper	2.3%	3.9%	7.3%
Engaged in other activity	8.7%	7.8%	12.1%

If we look at the levels of activity in U.S. House races, it is not surprising that the major party activists were much more active, since the Reform Party ran so few House candidates. We also find that Reform activists were slightly less likely to vote for their party's Presidential candidate (91% voted for Perot) compared with activists in the established parties (95% of whom voted for their party's nominee).

Although the high levels of involvement by the Reform contributors in the 1996 Presidential campaign are a hopeful sign for party building after 1996, we have data on the continuity of activity between the 1992 Perot campaign and 1996 which temper optimism. We have a national sample of potential Perot activists we first surveyed in 1992 (callers to the Perot 1-800 number), which we have followed through the 1994 and 1996 elections. Among those who were involved in the 1992 Perot campaign, only about 20% reported remaining active in 1996. This failure to keep a stable activist core between the two elections presents a serious challenge to the future of the Perot movement. Overall, we find

high levels of activity in our Reform sample in 1996, although much of this appears to come from individuals new to the cause rather than from continuing activists.

Conclusion

In some important respects our analysis shows that the Reform Party activists were remarkably similar to their counterparts in the traditional parties. They were more active in the presidential campaign than Democratic and Republican activists. The Reform Party constituency is not as evident on the traditional left-right

for the party. Indeed, our findings suggest that Reform activists were more positive about their party and its leader than major-party activists were about their party or its candidate. The real question, though, is whether that attraction for the party will remain once Perot steps aside.

A second major challenge facing the Reform Party will be its ability to differentiate itself adequately from the Republican party on the deficit issue and other matters close to its center. Its unique policy appeal in the areas of "economic nationalism" and term limits give it an important wedge into political support that will enhance its ability to attract and hold the sorts of potential activists we are studying. However, because the major parties have strong incentives to coopt the most attractive elements of a third party's agenda, the bases of support for Reform Party issues, like the state of the national economy, may be beyond the party's ability to control.

Finally, because the Democrats and Republicans each have a major institutional foothold in the national government, they will have ample opportunities to demonstrate their commitment to key issues like cutting the deficit. Of course they may also bog down in partisan squabbling, pass up important reform issues like campaign financing, and otherwise fail to address concerns important to Reform supporters. Or, as with economic nationalism issues, the major parties may be too internally divided to coopt Perot's support. The candidate-centered nature of our national politics in company with a prevailing cynicism about politicians and government institutions may continue to provide ample leverage for the Reform Party. Much depends on the new party's ability to present a united front to the nation on issues of concern to a broad spectrum of voters, and on its ability to contest elections with new leadership that will attract widespread support. Only time will tell whether the party can build on its impressive successes thus far to become an enduring "third force" in American politics.

scale as it is by focusing on issues at the core of the Reform message. But here, the Reform Party seems to have distinguished itself from the major parties by adopting a distinctive set of issue positions, especially issues tapping an "economic nationalist" dimension that combines immigration limits, import limits, and decreased U. S. involvement in world affairs. There is also evidence that Reform activists were distinctive on term limits and, to a much lesser extent, the deficit. At the same time, Reform Party backers were much less aware of their party's positions, even on core issues, than were Democrats and Republicans. Reform Party perceptions of Perot and the party were most secure on the issues at the core of their message, but even on these issues there were relatively high percentages of activists giving "not sure" responses.

What do our results suggest for the future of the Reform Party? Perhaps the greatest challenge facing the party is its ability to survive a transition from Ross Perot to new leadership. In data not presented in this report, we find very high levels of affection among Reform activists for Perot and

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