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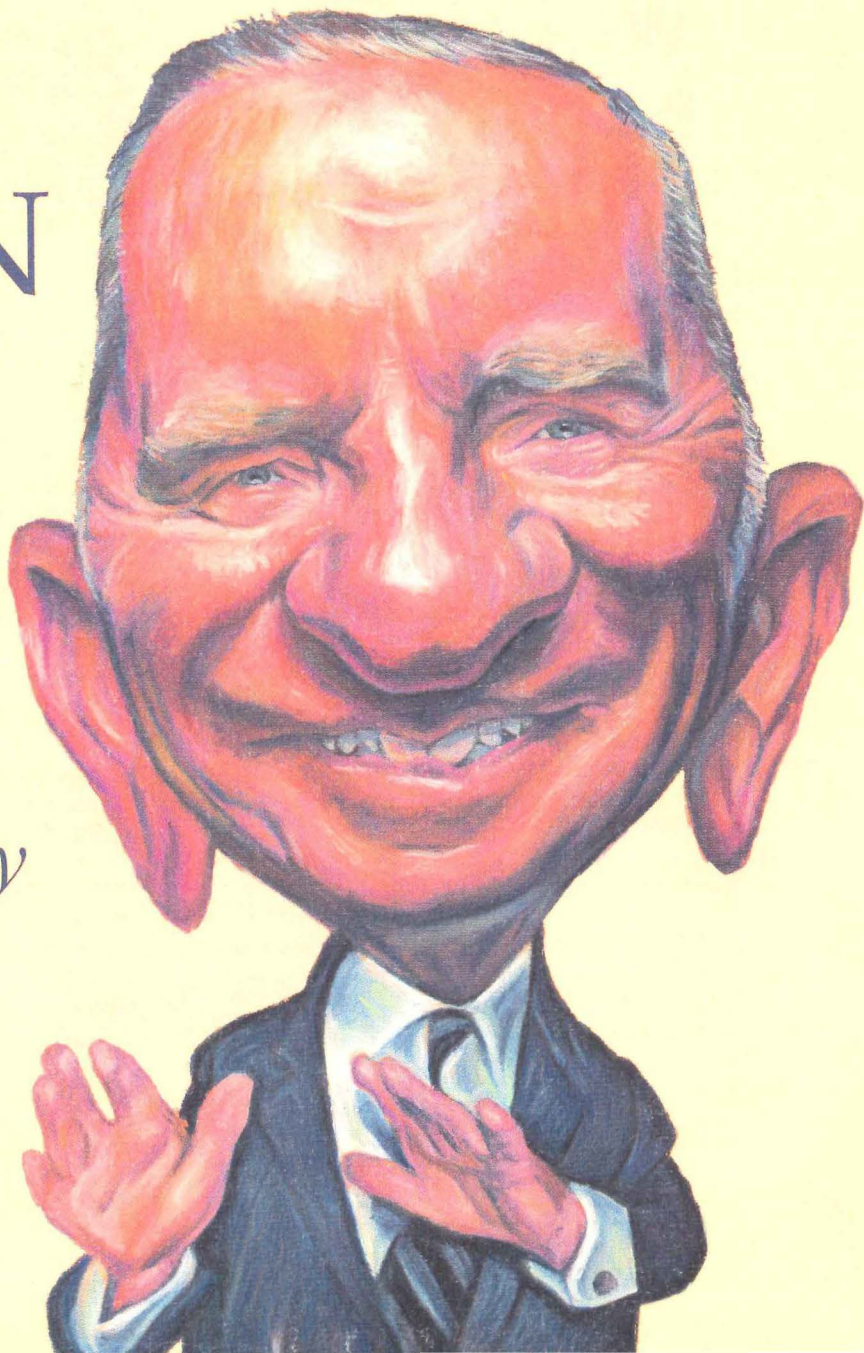
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PEROT AND CON

*How Ross'
teledemocracy
would screw
the average guy*

By Christopher Georges



Perot and Con

Ross' teledemocracy is supposed to bypass special interests and take the influence of money out of politics.

It won't

by Christopher Georges

By the time of the Major League All Star game last July, Edgar Martinez was near the top of virtually every stack of numbers in the big leagues: third in the league in hitting (.319 average), 46 runs-batted-in, 14 home runs—and a standout third baseman. But come the big game, starting at third was not Martinez, but struggling Boston Red Sox Wade Boggs, whose ho-hum .268 average was 64th in the league, and who had 25 runs-batted-in and 6 home runs. So why did Boggs get the nod over Martinez? All Star starters aren't selected by experts, but by the fans in a popular vote. So while Seattle Mariner Martinez garnered 500,000 votes from the bleacher set—finishing *fifth* in the third base plebiscite—he wasn't even close to Boggs's 1.2 million. Were the fans duped—fooled perhaps by the cachet of the Boggs name? Or did they know Martinez was the best man, but still wanted to see the hobbling Fenway legend in one more All Star go-round?

Whatever the reason, Boggs's selection raises a broader question: The All Star selection process appeals to the fans, but does it produce the best team? The answer is relevant to more than just readers of *Baseball Digest*, because in a very different realm—the political one—we are creeping ever closer towards the kind of system that put Boggs in the All Star lineup: a direct, let-the-majority-decide democracy. That drift towards direct democra-

cy, while certainly part of a larger movement, is currently led by Ross Perot. Problem is, the Prince of Populism's vaunted teledemocracy will not only give us more Boggs's and fewer Martinez's, but rather than, as advertised, "taking America back," it may well hand it over to the special interests.

Of course, populist yearnings among the American people—from Thomas Jefferson to Robert LaFollette to Bill Clinton—have been as common as House scandals. But today, three forces have converged to make direct democracy a viable, even appealing, option. For one, the public's frustration with government—and with Congress in particular—has reached new heights: Eighty percent of those surveyed earlier this year in a *Washington Post/ABC News* poll, for example, said that the "country needs to make major changes in the way government works." At the same time, the public is more eager than ever to give the government a piece of its mind. You don't have to be a talk show junkie to spot this trend; just ask the White House operators, who on a busy day during the Reagan years might have fielded 5,000 calls, but in 1993 are busy with 40,000 *a day*. Finally, factor in the most recent and significant development: the flourishing of technological tools that will allow anyone with a TV, a phone line, and a few minutes to spare to vote on any issue, any time.

This technology is expected to be on line by the time we elect our next president, and the

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public apparently has few reservations about using it. More than two thirds of all Americans favor national binding referenda on major issues, according to a 1993 survey by the Americans Talk Issues Foundation. Gallup surveys have put the figure at nearly 70 percent. All of which helps explain the rise of a populist like Perot, who can preach with complete credibility, as he did during the campaign, that “we can show everybody in Congress what the voters want, and we’ll be programming [Congress]. That’s the way it’s supposed to be.”

What Perot’s getting at—and what most advocates of teledemocracy preach—is that empowering the people with a direct vote in policy-making is the surest cure for the two great plagues of our representative system: It is strangled by special interests, and it moves at a glacial pace. Teledemocrats figure that if only we turned the levers of power over to the people, well, we’d fix all that. For one, the people, by going over the heads of Congress, could quickly eliminate the tiresome, time-consuming political haggling and, say, decide to outlaw fat cat political contributions tonight at 10, and, if we felt so inclined, approve stricter gun laws tomorrow at noon. And at the same time, in a single stroke, we’d wipe out the clout of the nasty special interests. That’s because the people cannot be bought, making all the lobbying by the monied interests as relevant as eight-track tapes. “It’s the best way I know,” says Mike McManus, organizer of USA Vote, a Maryland-based group attempting to organize national televotes, “to empower the people against the special interests.”

Or is it? As we take our first timid steps towards Perot’s push-button utopia, it’s worth pausing to consider what we might forfeit in the process. Despite the rhetoric of populists like McManus, the evidence is that the closer we get to direct democracy, the more we *disempower*

the common man, and at the same time enhance—or at the very least keep intact—the muscle of the monied interests. And while teledemocracy, no doubt, can short-circuit the haggling that throttles Congress and jump start our chronically gridlocked process, that much maligned horse trading may, in fact, be more valuable than any legislation it holds up.

So what will it be? No doubt, James Madison and bookish fellow Framers were bright guys, but they weren’t seers: Let’s face it, America’s no longer a nation of yeomen. Perhaps technology has made their experiment in government obsolete. Perhaps it’s time to deposit those interminable *Federalist Papers* in the recycling bin and move our system of government into this century. Should we, in short, stick with representarian Madison or turn to majoritarian Perot?

Mass appeals

That question has been developing steam longer than Con Edison. Back when Madison and company ruled America, the nation was governed by the elite, thanks to devices such as the election of senators by state legislatures and property qualifications for voting. Andrew Jackson gave the masses a louder voice a few decades later with universal white male suffrage. Gradually, political parties, replete with blustery conventions, opened the door a crack wider, and in 1968, the grassroots were further empowered through nominating primaries. By the eighties, TV had further eroded the filter between the governors and the governed, and, as the most recent election showed, even the Dan Rathers are being brushed aside. These days, if you’re unsure whether to vote for a candidate, you can call him up on “Larry King” and interview him yourself.

In the meantime, while the U.S. has never held a national referendum, 26 states now permit citizens to put measures on the ballot for a

public vote. And while initiatives have been possible in many states since the early 1900s, only in the last 20 years have they grown truly popular. From 1950-69, for example, only 19 state ballots were held in the entire nation. In 1988 alone, 50 were conducted. And if those referenda don't occur quite quickly enough for you, move to Colorado, where Gov. Roy Roemer has installed unofficial voting computers in shopping malls and public buildings to let citizens register how they'd like their tax dollars spent (more—or less—money for a. schools b. prisons c. voting kiosks, etc.).

Roemer, however, is no match for Referendum Ross. "We go to the people on television," Perot told the nation during the campaign, "and explain an issue in great detail, and say: 'Here are the alternatives that we face. As owners of the country, what do you feel is best for the country?' The American people react . . . and we know what the people want." Just to make sure we knew he wasn't bluffing, citizen Perot gave his televote a dry run not long after his 19 percent Election Day showing, holding a "national referendum" on 16 issues which, although statistically dubious, was a referendum nonetheless. If you're un-American enough to believe Perot's gone a bit far, you're decisively in the minority; while Clinton's favorability ratings have deflated since Election Day, recent polls show that if the election had been reheld in May, Perot and Clinton would have finished dead even.

While Perot is out in front on the referendum bandwagon, other high profile politicians such as Jack Kemp, Pat Buchanan, Richard Gephardt, and Phil Gramm have all supported the idea. And, in 1977, the last time the notion of a national referendum was raised in Congress, more than 50 Members supported the measure. (The bill would have permitted any initiative backed by 3 million signatures to be voted on by the public; if a majority of Americans approved, the initiative would have become law.)

Not to be left behind, the Clinton administration has hooked up a White House phone line to record public sentiment ("for the budget plan, touch one if you support the program"); holds conference calls run by the president to families around the nation; has signed on to a \$5 billion plan to support the design of a fiber optics "data superhighway"; and has linked the White House

to computer bulletin boards. It even plans to create BC-TV, the political equivalent of MTV, so that Americans craving a presidential fix can tune in to the Bill, Hillary, Al, and Tipper show 24 hours a day. And if you're not inclined to turn on BC-TV, the administration's got an answer for that, too: Clinton advisers Doug Ross and David Osborne are reportedly developing a communications strategy that would be based on sending—just after Clinton unveils any new initiative (through a public meeting, of course)—video and audio cassettes as well as quick response questionnaires to millions of Americans.

But with or without Clinton, or even Perot, most Americans will soon be hooked into our leadership through the already-under-construction data superhighway. In April, the nation's largest cable company, Tele-Communications, Inc., sharply accelerated the race to link the nation by unveiling a \$2 billion plan to lay fiber optic cable throughout 400 communities by 1996. One hundred and fifty cities, the company said, will be on the interstate network by 1993. Tele-Communications is not alone; the more than 60 firms scrambling to get a toehold in the interactive market come straight from the Fortune 500: Intel, Time Warner, Microsoft, General Instruments, NBC.

The cyberprize they're chasing is the edge in the two-way fiber optic cable communications market, which will not only allow users, through their TV sets, to respond instantly to commercials, order food, conduct bank transactions, play along with live sporting events, pay bills, or guess the outcome of "Murder She Wrote" (for cheesy prizes), but vote—or at least instantaneously voice an opinion. So when, say, President Perot gives us his pie chart lecture on the Social Security crisis, and then asks us for some insta-policy, you need only pick up your book-sized interactive box and let your fingers do the voting.

That's no hype dream. In fact, such a system is already in place in several cities and has been used for just that purpose. Interactive Network in Mountainview, California, for example, which has linked more than 3,000 homes, held instant votes immediately after both Clinton's State of the Union address (four minutes after the speech was completed, 71 percent of the

viewers punched in that they supported the Clinton plan), as well as Perot's most recent 30-minute infomercial. Perot was so enamored of the results that he contacted Interactive regarding a more formal link between the two organizations, Interactive officials said.

And while televoting is just one of several two-way TV applications companies are pursuing, more than a half dozen for- and not-for-profit organizations are aiming to put the new fiber optic technology to use for national on-line voting. USA Vote, for example, plans to launch an interactive TV show later this year that will feature 30 minutes of debate followed by an instant call-in vote on a major issue. Bruce Jaynes, president of Ohio-based Voter Systems Inc., who has spent eight years designing a system that will allow instant voting, is already attempting to negotiate a contract with a TV network to make his plan fly. And not-for-profits like the Markel Foundation and the Aspen Institute, as well as independent academics such as Amitai Etzioni and the University of Texas's James Fishkin, are examining ways to put the new technology to work. "The weird thing about all this," explains Gary Arlen, president of Arlen Communications Inc., a Bethesda research firm specializing in interactive media, "is that if you don't pay attention, you'll look up one day and it will all be here."

Greeced wheels

What's not weird, however, is the larger question that the push-button technology brings: whether to push. If, as teledemocrats claim, majoritarian government is the magic bullet that will at long last make our government the true servant of the common man, why not?

Several decades of experience in direct democracy at the state level—namely state initiatives and referenda—provide a clue. California in particular offers a useful model, where citizens have voted on more ballot initiatives—more than 200 since 1912—than anywhere in the nation. In fact, no society since ancient Greece has sustained such a long history of direct democracy. But not even Homer could mythologize the success of majoritarian government in California and other states, especially with regard to the clout of the monied interests. Of course, there

have been some notable reforms passed directly by the people over the years, such as campaign finance reforms, bottle bills, tobacco tax hikes, and term limits for state legislators. Even so, even Hill and Knowlton couldn't put a happy face on the larger referendum picture:

► *More, not less, money is spent in direct democracy politics than in representative politics.*

In California, in both 1988 and 1990, more money (about \$125 million each year) was spent—through ad campaigns, ballot signing drives, and get-out-the-vote efforts—to influence California voters on initiative measures than was spent by all special interests to lobby California legislators on all other legislation (more than 1,000 bills). Spending on single initiatives there and in other states can run as high as tens of millions of dollars. The alcohol industry, for example, spent \$38 million defeating a proposed alcohol tax in 1990. The truly bad news, however, is not so much that the people eventually end up paying for these massive industry-run campaigns in higher prices, but that to battle the well-oiled industries, the goo-goos have to raise equally huge sums. Alcohol tax proponents in California, for example, wasted \$1.3 million on their losing effort and environmentalists there squandered more than \$1 million in 1990 on a campaign to save the trees. Not only is coming up with that kind of cash a task in itself, but it saps valuable time and resources from other areas of the cause, such as, say, funding anti-drunk driving campaigns.

► *Not only is more money spent, but direct democracy does not diminish—and can even enhance—the wealthy interests' ability to affect legislation.*

"Money is, all things being equal, the single most important factor determining direct legislation outcomes," concludes Colorado College political scientist Thomas Cronin, who authored perhaps the most comprehensive examination of direct democracy in the U.S. "Even proponents of direct democracy campaign reforms are pessimistic about solving the money problem." Study after study backs Cronin's claim: The Council on Economic Priorities found that in state initiatives the corporate-backed side almost

always outspends its opponents, and wins about 80 percent of the time. And another recent examination that charted 72 ballot questions from 1976-82 similarly found that nearly 80 percent of the time the higher spending side won.

And who has the most money to spend? Certainly not tree huggers nor mothers against drunk driving. Businesses in California kicked in more than 80 percent of the money for the 18 highest-spending initiatives since 1956, while grassroots organizations were able to raise just 3 percent of all funds spent. It's not unusual for monied interests to outspend their opponents by factors of 20-to-1. In 1980, for example, Chevron, Shell, ARCO and Mobil and friends made a more than \$5 million investment, outspending their opponents by 100-to-1, to ensure the failure of a proposed California oil surtax. Not even OPEC could buy this kind of clout: Five months prior to the vote, 66 percent of the people favored the tax, but after the industry bludgeoned the public with TV ads and other propaganda, only 44 percent of the voters stuck with the humbled reformers. In 1990, a Los Angeles initiative to ban the use of a highly toxic chemical at a Torrance, California, refinery lost, thanks to Mobil Oil's \$750,000 effort—a campaign that cost the company \$53 per vote, or nearly 12 times what the ballots' proponents could muster. A few of the measures that big money helped defeat in recent years included bills that would have raised the alcohol tax, required greater oil and gas conservation, brought tougher insurance regulation, created smoking regulations, required stricter handgun control, promoted forest conservation, placed a surtax on oil profits, and limited state salaries.

► *Voters are just as likely—and perhaps more likely—to be conned by special interests as representatives are to be bought by them.*

Look at it this way: If you are a salesman trying to sell a car to an 80-year-old woman, would you rather deal with her, or her representative—her son the lawyer? For the monied interests, that's a no-brainer. One clever technique concocted by industry groups is wait to see what do-gooder initiatives qualify for the ballot, and then quickly draft counter measures—measures which have no hope of passing a plebiscite, but are intended instead merely to confuse voters; the monied interests are well aware of studies showing that voters are easi-

ly confused by conflicting initiatives and as a result tend to simply vote “no” on both of them. A 1990 California environmental reform package, for example, known as “Big Green,” was matched by two corporate-backed initiatives, one of which was billed as a “pesticide safety policy,” funded by Atlantic Richfield (\$950,000), Chevron (\$800,000), Shell (\$600,000), and Phillip Morris (\$125,000), among others. All three were voted down. Also in 1990, part of the \$38 million outlay by the alcohol industry to kill a proposed liquor tax was spent pushing two counter measures: a bill proposing the industry's own version of a liquor alcohol tax as well as an anti-tax measure.

If the special interests don't baffle you with their counter measures, they'll probably get you with their deceptive advertising. One recent study of 25 initiatives concluded that the most successful initiative opposition campaigns have won in large part based on airing confusing messages through paid advertising. In fact, dubious initiative ad campaigns are more likely to confuse voters than negative or false advertising in candidate campaigns simply because issue initiatives fail to provide voters with the traditional political cues, such as party affiliation, to help voters decide. And while representatives are not immune to lies and deception, it's a lot easier, not to mention cheaper, for an environmental advocate to counter a dubious claim if he's only got to convince a few congressmen—as opposed to a few million otherwise-distracted citizens—that Exxon's pulling a con.

Consider, for example, an ad run as part of a \$6 million effort by Californians for Sensible Laws, an industry group led by beverage firms such as Budweiser, Coke, and Pepsi, opposing a 1982 container recycling initiative. The spot falsely claimed the bill would cripple the state's voluntary recycling program, making life especially tough for Boy and Girl Scouts: The ad featured a uniformed Boy Scout asking his father why “the grown-ups” were trying to close down “Mr. Erikson's recycling center and put us Scouts out of business?” Another beverage industry ad presented five Oregonians who claimed a similar law was unpopular in their state, even though polls showed Oregonians overwhelmingly favored the measure. It was revealed later that the “citizens” in the ad were four Oregon beer distributor employees and one supermarket employee. Sure enough, the spon-

sors of the initiative could not afford a response, and although the bottle bill had 2-1 support in early polls, it failed by 44-56 percent.

What's also failed is direct democracy's ability to work in favor of racial and ethnic minorities. A few of the numerous examples where voters ganged up on those groups over the years include a 1964 California referendum in which citizens overturned by a 2-to-1 margin a law passed by the state legislature that prohibited racial discrimination by realtors. (In fact, of five referenda ever held in states to prohibit racial discrimination, not one has passed.) Last year, voters in Colorado passed an anti-gay measure voiding any existing gay rights laws in Denver, Aspen, and Boulder. And if you think majority tyranny is limited just to ethnics, racial groups, and gays, talk to the children of Kalkaska, Michigan, where citizens earlier this year voted to close down the school system three months early instead of paying an extra \$200-\$400 each in taxes.

Popular demands

Despite the evidence, let's assume the teledemocrats are *right*: Suppose that the people will take the time to be educated, and that the special interests will be persuaded or forced to refrain from false advertising and other deceptions. Suppose, in short, we *can* create a utopian system of majoritarian rule.

The good news for the Majoritarian Majority is that in some cases direct democracy will probably produce better results than representative government—say, in gun control laws. Which is precisely why the notion of push-button democracy plays so well in Perotville: It would be a wonderful world, indeed, if we could get the people together to vote on just those issues where we think the special interests are oppressing the rest of us.

But what about the rest of the issues, and especially those issues of belief, where fundamental rights come into play—issues such as the death penalty or gay rights. Do you want the majority deciding for you in those cases? One way to find out is by examining some examples of what the majority does believe. The majority of Americans would:

- sentence anyone who commits a murder to death

- send all occasional drug users to military style boot camps

- not allow any group to use a public building to hold a meeting denouncing the government

- ban movies with foul language or nudity

- ban from libraries books that preach the overthrow of the U.S. government

- make it illegal to publish materials the government classifies as secret

- outlaw the use of obscene gestures towards public officials

- favor the government keeping lists of people who partake in protest demonstrations

- keep in custody, when the nation is at war, people suspected of disloyalty

- require the reading of the Lord's Prayer in schools

- make homosexual relations between consenting adults illegal

- have rejected the Marshall Plan, and every year since 1950 voted to have spent less on foreign aid, and currently oppose aid to Russia

Of course, it is possible that the polls that produce such results were flawed; opinion can be distorted, after all, by the way questions are phrased. This is, in fact, the heart of the problem with majority rule through referendum. When the wording of an issue is frozen, and printed on the ballot, or even worse, flashed on the TV screen, there is no opportunity to do anything but take one side or the other—no chance, in other words, to see enough wisdom in the other person's arguments, or for him to see the point in yours, and for the wording to be amended accordingly.

In a representative government, legislators can, and do, deliberate and amend. These discussions can, of course, lead to imperfect compromise. But accommodation, however imperfect, may be essential to preserving the very fabric of democracy, especially when issues of morality and belief threaten to tear the nation apart. And the accommodation does not have to be imperfect. With deliberation, there is at least a chance that not only a better, but even the *right* law will result. Teledemocracy will deprive us of that chance. And, if you're not convinced, we can always vote on it. □