



Electing Jesse Ventura: A Third-Party Success Story

Jacob Lentz

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During the hotly contested 1998 Minnesota gubernatorial election, First Lady Hillary Rodham Clinton travelled to the state to stump for Democratic Farm Labor candidate Skip Humphrey. She described Reform Party candidate Jesse Ventura's campaign as a "carnival sideshow." When the remark was passed on to him, he rejoined, "Hillary should be more concerned about leaving Bill alone." Ventura's salty retort shows his down-home appeal to the Minnesota voters who elected him governor over two more experienced and well known candidates: Humphrey and Republican Bill Coleman. Humphrey, the son of the former vice president, was the respected state attorney general, and Coleman earned approval as mayor of Saint Paul.

The author offers a fascinating investigation of how this political novice and former professional wrestler, running as a third-party candidate, defeated these prominent candidates of the two major parties. Ventura was elected less on his engaging personality than on the unique Minnesota political setting. Minnesota is one of only seven states that allow residents to register and vote on Election Day. Ventura received 70% of these election-day votes. He also benefited from what Lentz calls "the theory of Dudes." The dudes are working class men (and, to a lesser extent, women) with families, who earn less than \$50,000 a year. A large majority of the dudes voted for Ventura. In addition, Minnesota's election finance laws, which favor established third parties, allowed for generous funding of his campaign.

Media support for Ventura's campaign was more favorable than it usually gives to third-party candidates. Ironically, because the media failed to recognize as much as the public did that Ventura was a serious candidate, his record-or lack of one-was not closely watched. His vaguely defined platform-fewer taxes, less government, personal freedom, individual responsibility-captivated his followers. More than 60% of eligible voters turned out, making Ventura the winner with 37% of the vote.

Ultimately, he was elected governor because the state's political rules and public perceptions of the three candidates were aligned favorably for Ventura. According to Lentz, Jesse Ventura was elected not because he was a celebrity but because he ran as a people's candidate in Minnesota.

KARL HELICHER (March / April 2002)

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