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# The politics of alienation: nonvoting and support for third-party candidates among 18–30-year-olds<sup>☆</sup>

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## Abstract

This article analyzes why many alienated youth choose to stay home on election day while others respond by voting for a third-party candidate. Probit analysis of the 1992 and 1996 American National Election Study data suggests that alienated young people were less likely to vote in both these elections. Among voters, such alienated younger cohorts were more likely to vote for Ross Perot in the 1992 presidential election, but apparently Perot's appeal to alienated youth faded by the 1996 presidential race. These findings confirm that many young individuals do not vote, but that the existence of the Perot candidacy in 1992 led certain alienated youth to use their vote as a form of protest, by casting a ballot for an unlikely winner in that presidential race.

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## 1. Introduction

Although the 1998 election victory of Governor Jesse Ventura was, in itself, unexpected, another remarkable aspect of this contest was his overwhelming appeal to first-time voters. Ventura received 46% of the vote of those under the age of 30, as compared to 37% of the entire electorate. The Ventura message apparently appealed to those young persons who felt alienated from conventional politics and who found an outlet for this discontent in Ventura (Beiler, 1999; Schier, 1999). This surge of first-time voters took advantage of Minnesota's election-day registration provision, and turnout surged to the highest in the nation, 60.1%.

This gubernatorial election in Minnesota centers on a phenomenon that is not unknown in U.S. politics—the electoral choices facing such an “alienated” individual. Does one choose

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between the two major party candidates despite one's lukewarm support for either of them? Or, does one, instead, vote for a candidate that is unlikely to win, but provides psychological satisfaction that one is able to express their disenchantment with the political world, or does one simply abstain from voting altogether? This article is an analysis of these various electoral options with regard to the 1992 and 1996 presidential elections. We argue that the context of the 1992 and 1996 election was such that many alienated individuals were provided with an outlet for their frustration at the political system. Specifically, such individuals could protest the current state of political affairs by voting for a third-party presidential candidate (see [Southwell & Everest, 1998](#)).

This type of protest voting represents an extension of the rejection voting model ([Fiorina, 1981](#); [Kernell, 1977](#); [Key, 1966](#)), whereby voters displeased with a certain policy or personality within their party defect to another party, because we are also including the dynamics of voter turnout and the appeal of third parties. That is, we suggest that the existence of a third-party candidate transformed certain alienated individuals from likely nonvoters into voters.

Protest voting differs from the strategic or "tactical" model in which individual preferences are often overridden by assessments of the competitive situation. As well-established in rational choice literature, this model assumes that an individual will vote for his second preference in a situation in which his first preference is unlikely to win, therefore, avoiding a "wasted" vote ([Black, 1979](#); [Cain, 1978](#); [Downs, 1957](#); [Duverger, 1967](#); [Palfrey, 1989](#)). In contrast, the protest voter may behave in an opposite manner to the strategic voter. He or she may gravitate toward a third-party candidate *because* that candidate has less chance of victory. [Bowler and Lanoue \(1992\)](#) describe the protest voter as one "who may vote for a third party not so much to unseat the incumbent as to reduce the majority status of that incumbent and so send a message of dissatisfaction" (1992: 489). Their research found that protest voting was more likely to occur in those districts in which third-party strength was weakest. Alienated individuals, per se, may not regard a vote for an unlikely winner as "wasted," but as a statement of dissatisfaction. We, therefore, suggest that, among voters, alienated individuals were more likely to vote for third-party candidates such as Ross Perot, Ralph Nader, or Jesse Ventura. Alienation can, and often, leads to abstention, but under certain contexts, it can result in elevated turnout (see [Citrin, 1974](#)).

## 2. The candidacy of Ross Perot

The candidacy of H. Ross Perot into the 1992 and 1996 elections certainly had the potential to fan the flames of alienation. Perot was described himself as an "outsider" who could "get things done" at a time when stories of congressional gridlock dominated the media, and accusations between Capitol Hill and the White House were a daily activity. Perot represented an alternative to "business as usual," and as such, had a special appeal to those disgruntled with the political system (see [Ceaser & Busch, 1993](#)).

Aggregate analysis of the 1992 presidential vote indicates that the Perot candidacy mobilized some individuals who otherwise would not have voted. Fourteen percent of those who voted for Perot, or about 2.6% of the electorate, indicated that if Perot had not been running, they would not have voted ([Ceaser & Busch, 1993](#); see also [Atkeson et al., 1996](#); [Gold, 1995](#); [Koch, 1998](#); [Rosenstone, 1996](#); [Zaller & Hunt, 1995](#)).

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