



When Frontrunners Emerge



By Lydia Saad

Between 1952 and 1996 seventeen open races were waged for the presidential nomination of the two major parties. Nine of these were on the Democratic side, eight on the Republican side. This year adds two such contests to the list.

If George Bush is upset by John McCain it will be the first time in modern polling history that the GOP's early choice did not proceed to victory at the convention. If Al Gore is upset by Bill Bradley, it won't be the first time that a strong Democratic frontrunner succumbed late in the game, but it would be the most dramatic example of such a loss.

One thing is clear from Gallup's last half-century of primary polling: If Gore and Bush ultimately become the nominees

for president, it will be one of the rare times in which both open-seat candidates emerged as national frontrunners well in advance of the election year. In each previous election where there was an open race in both parties—1960, 1968 and 1988—at least one side ran a competitive campaign to select its nominee.

A review of Gallup primary election polls from 1952 through 1996 finds that the most common scenario has been for the eventual Republican nominee to solidify his leading position early, and for the Democratic nominee to emerge relatively late, usually through the primary process.

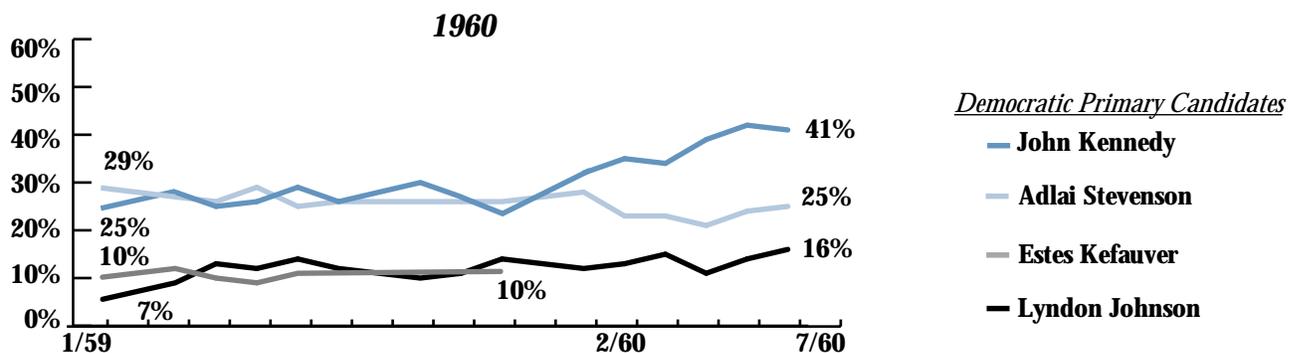
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The Democratic Primary Races

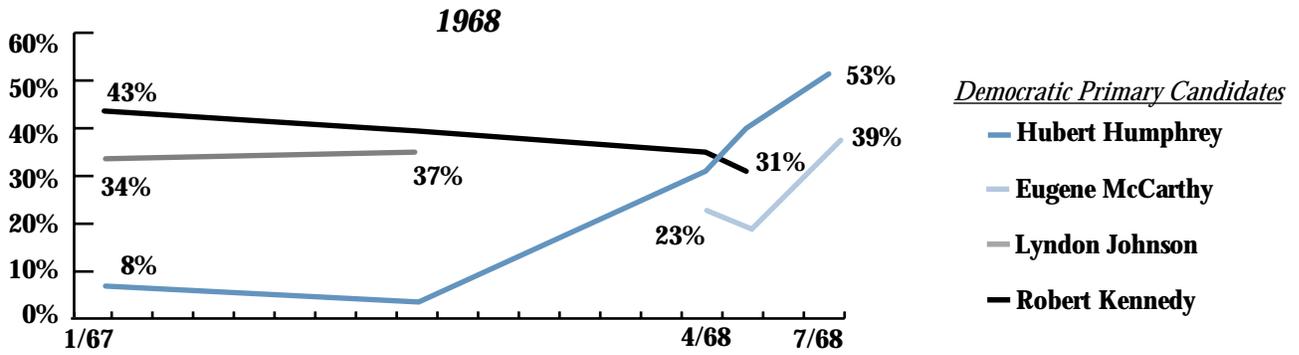
Only a few times in modern election history has a clear Democratic frontrunner emerged prior to the start of the primary season. The two exceptions were Adlai Stevenson, running for his second consecutive election in 1956, and Walter Mondale, running in 1984 four years after having served as Jimmy Carter's vice president. In each of the other seven cases of an open Democratic race, the eventual nominee was hardly obvious entering the year of the election. Although Stevenson was nominated by the Democratic convention in 1952, he never did particularly well among Democrats nationally in Gallup's pre-convention polls that year. In the

1960 election, Senator John F. Kennedy did not emerge from the Democratic pack until February. Similarly, Hubert Humphrey in 1968, George McGovern in 1972, Jimmy Carter in 1976, Michael Dukakis in 1988 and Bill Clinton in 1992 were all late bloomers, not leading the field until somewhere between January and June of the election year.

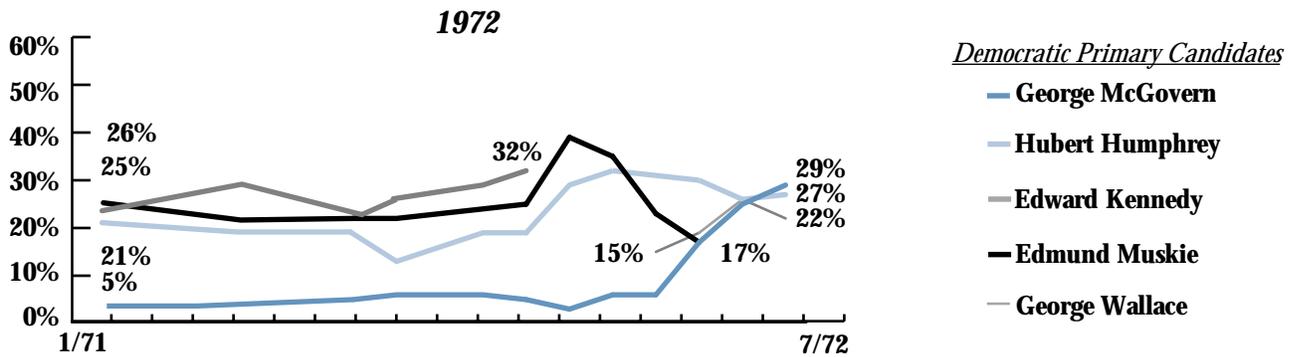
Beginning with 1960, and with the 1964, 1980 and 1996 Democratic incumbent years excluded, here is an overview of when the eventual Democratic nominee in each election emerged as a party frontrunner.



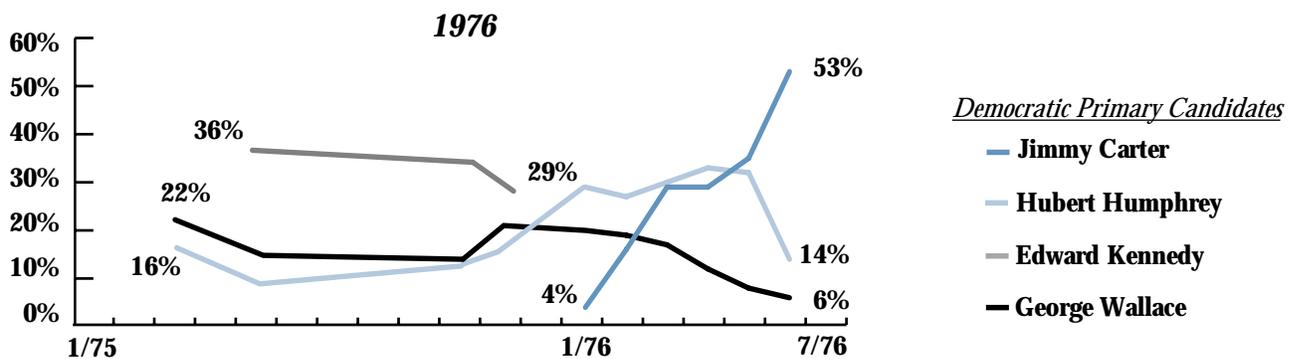
From January 1959 through the end of that year, Gallup polls recorded John Kennedy and Adlai Stevenson in a tight race for the Democratic nomination, running within four points of each other. In February 1960, Kennedy finally pulled ahead, steadily expanding his lead through the primary season.



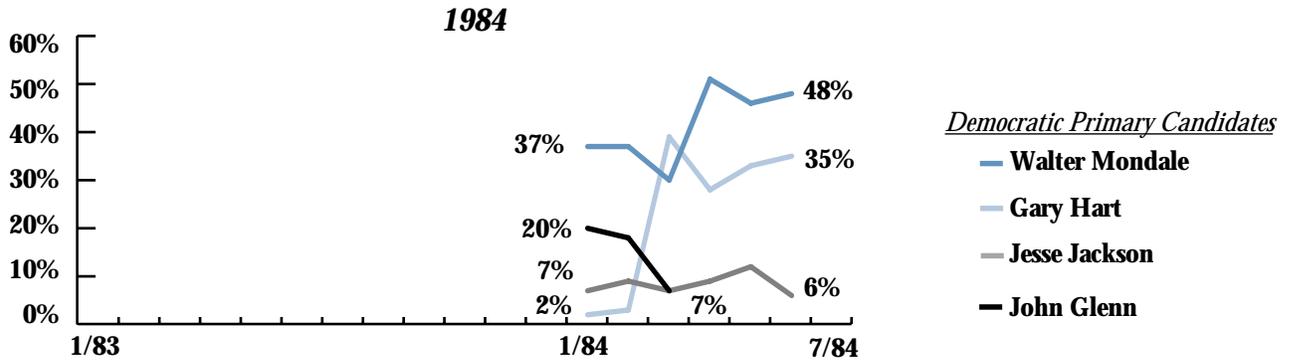
Hubert Humphrey ran in single digits behind President Lyndon Johnson and Robert Kennedy in Gallup polls conducted in 1967. By April 1968, Gallup recorded a close three-way race between Humphrey, Kennedy, and Eugene McCarthy, with Kennedy slightly ahead. It wasn't until May that Humphrey took the lead for good.



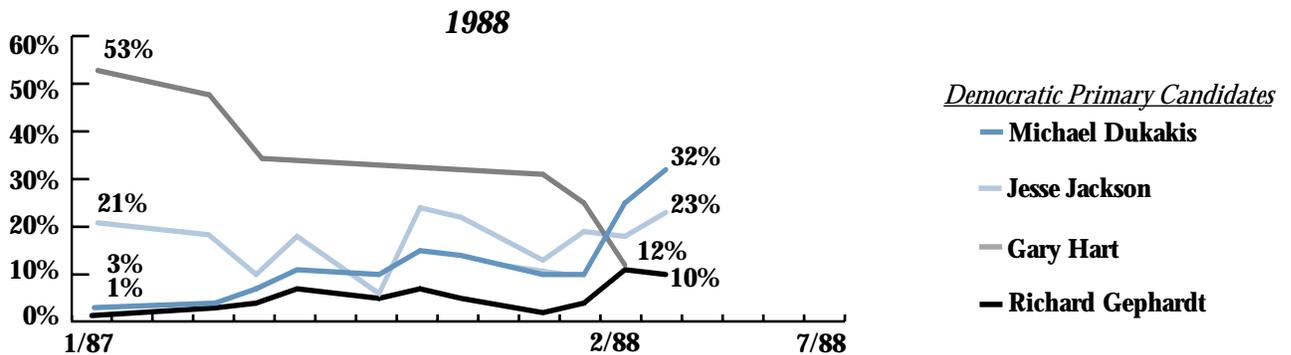
Gallup polls throughout 1971 showed George McGovern in single digits behind Edmund Muskie, Edward Kennedy and Hubert Humphrey, with Muskie the presumed frontrunner. McGovern did not become a national force in the Democratic field until the primaries were well underway, and he did not take the lead until June.



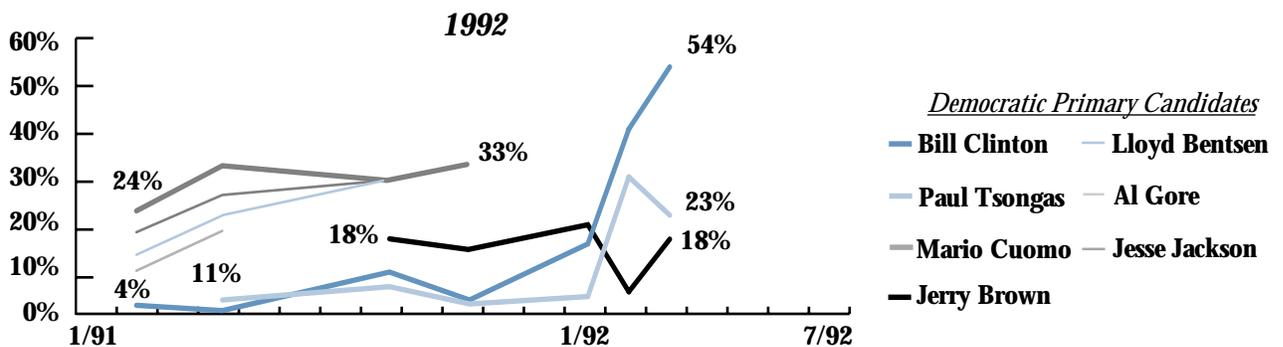
Carter was non-existent in Gallup's 1975 pre-primary polls of Democrats. When Carter entered the fray in January 1976, he garnered 4% of the vote, behind Humphrey, who was in the lead with 29%. Carter's "peanut brigade" in Iowa earned him national attention and a jump to 16% by February, but he did not take the lead in Gallup's polls of Democrats until June.



Walter Mondale began the 1984 election year as the clear frontrunner, holding a 17-point lead over John Glenn in January. By March, Gary Hart was besting Mondale, but Mondale managed to hold on and emerged from the primaries in June with a 13-point lead over Hart.



Michael Dukakis trailed frontrunner Gary Hart through the first half of 1987, until Hart's campaign came to an end over the "Monkey Business" affair. At that point Dukakis rose to the middle of the pack and finally took the lead from his chief rival, Jesse Jackson, in February 1988.



Bill Clinton proved to be a single-digit wonder, emerging in January 1992 in second place behind Jerry Brown, after a year of holding last or nearly last place among potential candidates Mario Cuomo, Jesse Jackson, Lloyd Bentsen, and Al Gore. Clinton became the frontrunner in February 1992.



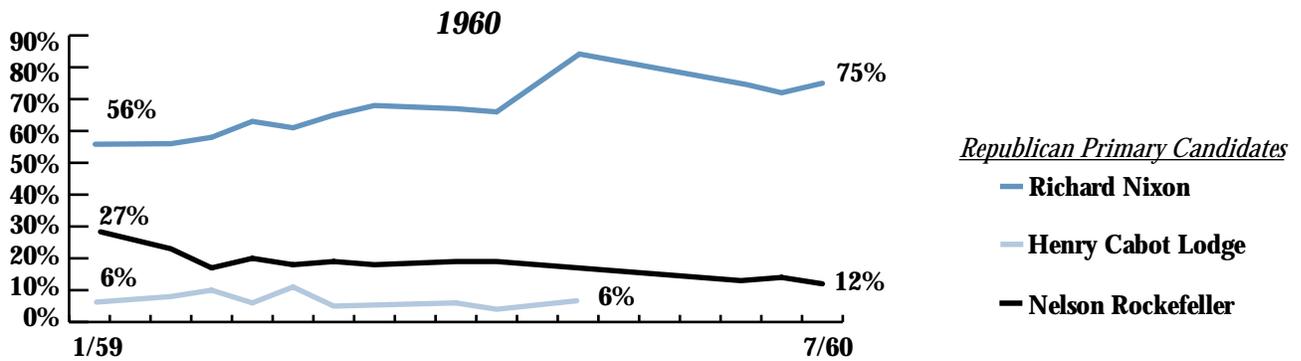
The Republican Party Races

In all eight competitive Republican races, the eventual nominee emerged early, and in most cases held that position consistently through the pre-primary and primary months. This included Dwight Eisenhower in 1952, Richard Nixon in 1960, Nixon again in 1968, Gerald Ford in 1976, Ronald Reagan in 1980, George Bush in 1988, and Robert Dole in 1996. It also included Barry Goldwater in the 1964 election, as he led rivals Nelson Rockefeller and George Romney for most of 1963. However, Goldwater languished in the national polls during the turbulent 1964 Republican primary season and had to fight for the nomination all the way to the convention.

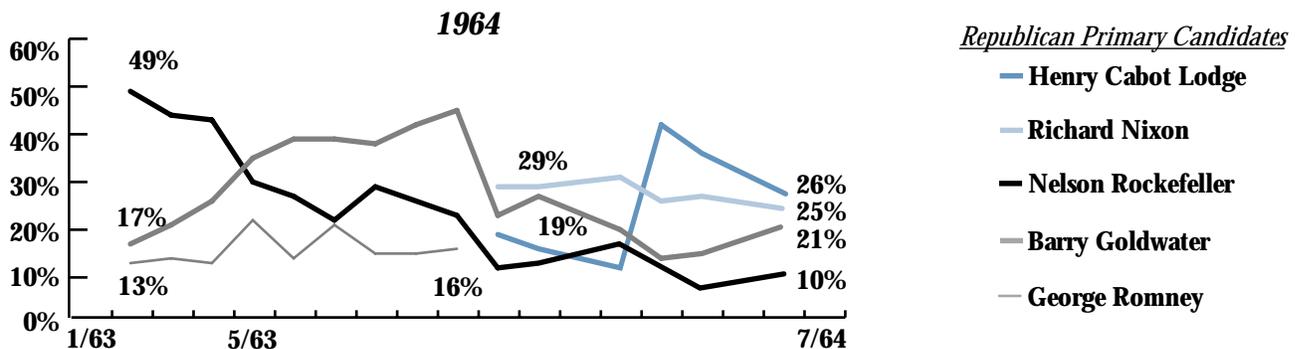
None of this is to say that significant challenges or even dramatic upsets weren't real possibilities. In particular, Reagan and Bush both had to stave off strong challenges in the early primary states, and Nixon came very close to losing his

nomination on the first ballot at the 1968 convention. Similarly, few in March 2000 would say that George W. Bush doesn't face a potential upset from John McCain with his double-digit victory in New Hampshire. But the fact remains that in every election since 1952, the Republican presidential nominee was a leading contender almost a full year before the start of the primary season.

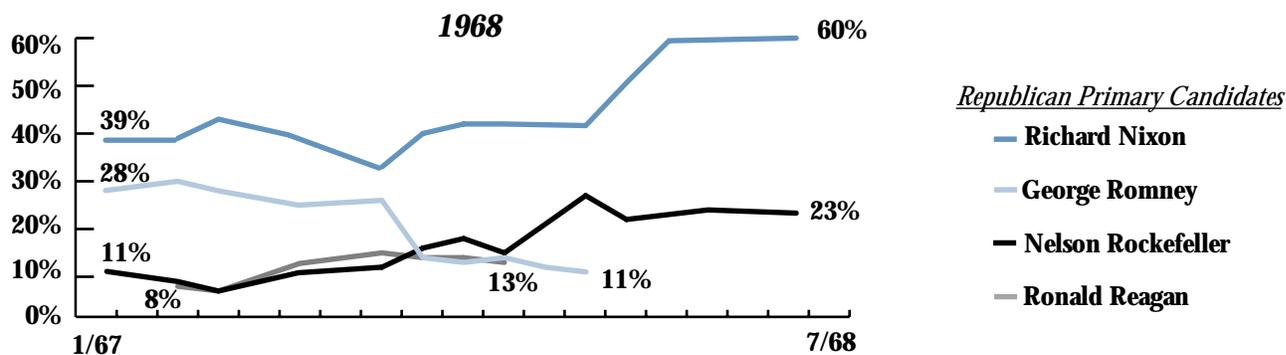
The historical record may have little predictive value, but if George W. Bush is not the Republican Party's nominee in 2000, it will be the first time since at least 1952 that someone other than an early election frontrunner did not capture the GOP nomination. Beginning with 1960 and excluding the Republican presidential re-election years of 1972, 1984 and 1992, here is an overview of when Republican frontrunners emerged.



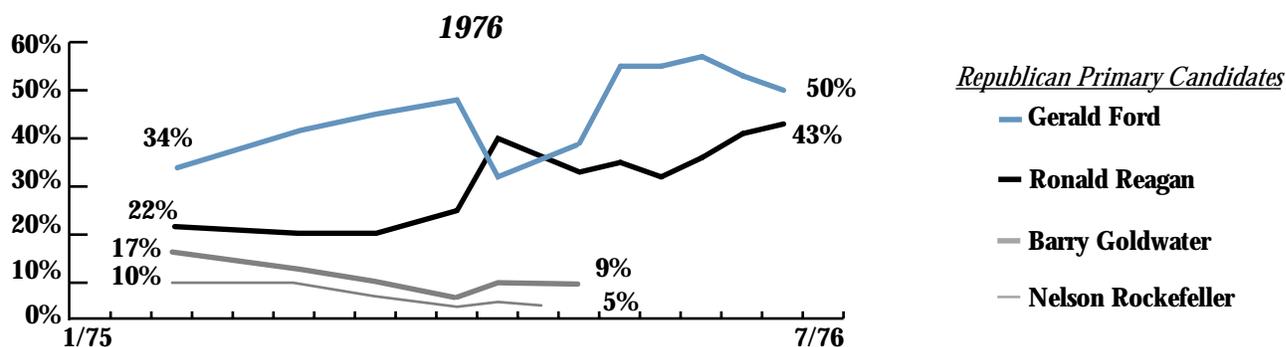
When Richard Nixon ran for the Republican nomination in 1960, he did so as the sitting vice president. Nelson Rockefeller and Henry Cabot Lodge (who never announced candidacies) proved to be weak rivals, and Nixon maintained a double-digit lead throughout the campaign.



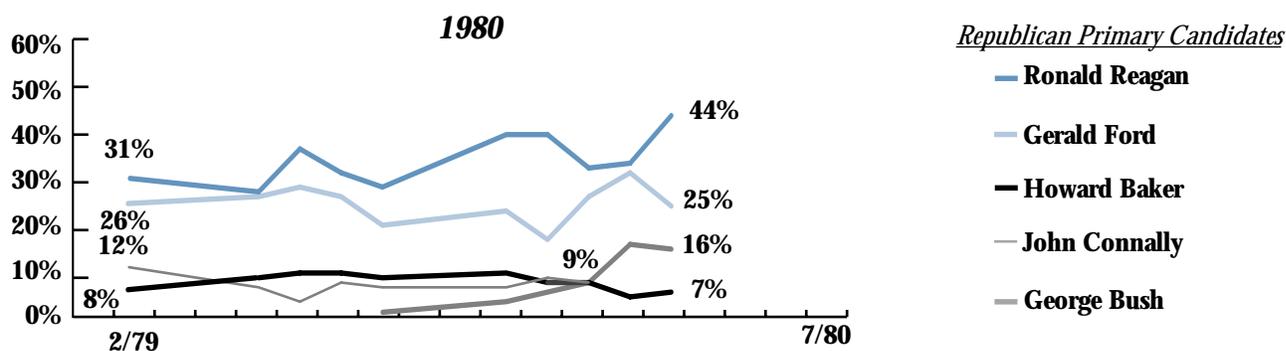
Barry Goldwater had a tumultuous candidacy through the primary season and into the Republican National Convention. While Goldwater was the Republican frontrunner starting as early as May 1963, his lead slid significantly in 1964 when Lodge scored a stunning write-in win in New Hampshire. But he continued to lead his chief rival Nelson Rockefeller through the late primary months leading up to the 1964 convention.



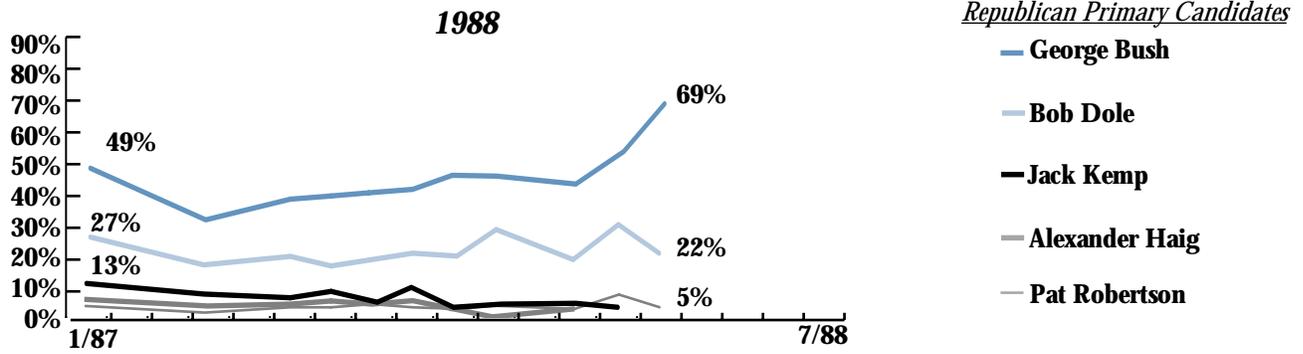
When Richard Nixon returned from political retirement in 1967 to seek the Republican nomination, he immediately became the frontrunner. Gallup polls taken in January 1967, 22 months before the general election, showed Nixon beating George Romney and Nelson Rockefeller by solid margins.



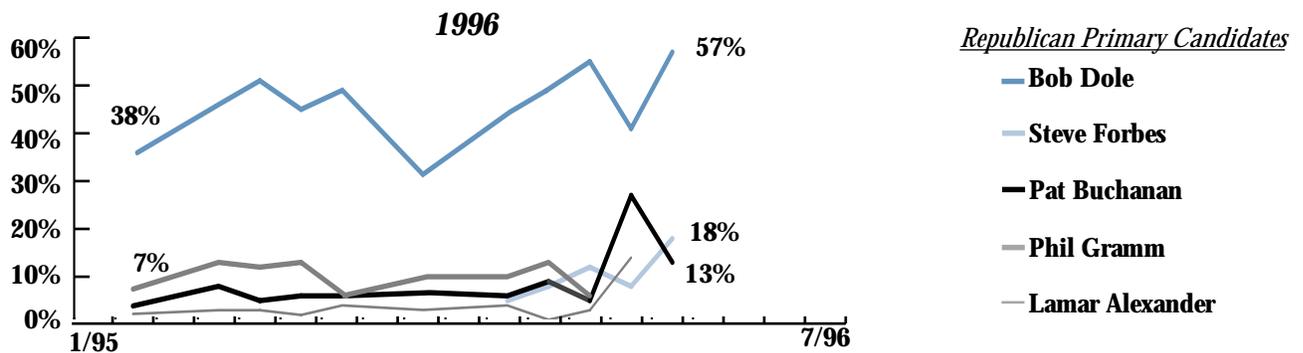
Although Gerald Ford ran in 1976 as the sitting president, the unique circumstances which put him there and the serious challenge he faced from Ronald Reagan made this presidential incumbent year a truly competitive one. Nevertheless, Ford was the odds-on favorite from the earliest Gallup primary polls, and led Reagan in nearly every Republican trial heat thereafter.



Ronald Reagan's 1976 campaign efforts paid dividends in 1979 as he emerged as the frontrunner for the 1980 Republican nomination. Reagan led the field in Gallup's first primary trial heat, conducted in February 1979. Although Bush came the closest to actually toppling Reagan in the early primaries, Reagan's closest competition in national polls came from Gerald Ford, who never actually entered the race.



Not unlike Al Gore today, vice president George Bush enjoyed frontrunner status for his party's nomination throughout 1987 and 1988. Similarly, Bush was also dogged by a strong second-place showing—Senate Majority Leader Bob Dole.



Bob Dole emerged in February 1995 as the Republican frontrunner. At the time he ran well ahead of rivals Phil Gramm, Lamar Alexander and Pat Buchanan, and he continued to do so throughout the year. Except for the Buchanan upset in New Hampshire, Dole ran into little trouble on his way to the Republican convention.

Some context and caveats are worth mentioning with respect to the data presented here. One is the electoral transformation in the 1970s which increased the influence of party primaries. The national primary polls taken in earlier years may not be as indicative of candidate strength or have the same political import as those conducted more recently. Secondly, trends based on public opinion at the national level occasionally obscure political battles that were occurring behind the scenes or at the state level. Many an Iowa caucus or New Hampshire primary has thrown a curve ball at frontrunners over the years and created more lively contests than the relatively flat line graphs may indicate. Thirdly, not all candidates for all years are shown in the summary trends here. In some cases an editorial judgement was made to exclude a particular candidate because his or her support level was low, or because the measurements for the candidate were

infrequent. In a few cases—such as Hubert Humphrey in 1960— there is no record in Gallup polls of an important candidate's name being included in primary trial heats. Thus, the picture we have for some years may be incomplete.

Despite these limitations, many useful insights are gleaned from this compilation. At the most basic level, it clarifies the various patterns of public support candidates have garnered on the way to winning their party's nomination. It helps confirm our understanding of when particular nominees emerged as serious candidates. And it simplifies the process of bringing historical data to bear on such questions as, "Can John McCain beat George Bush?" "Can Al Gore lose to Bill Bradley?", which pollsters are flooded with at this time of year. Answering such questions may not be wise, but the foolhardy should at least be armed with data. ●