THE BUSHPPOP THING:
GETTING THE JOB APPROVAL NUMBERS IN
PERSPECTIVE

By W. Wayne Shannon

For some fifty years now, since George Gal-
lup began to take regular readings of presidential
job approval, standing in the polls has been a
standard measurement of presidential perform-
ance. Once technology had made it possible, it was
inevitable that the press and the public would want
to know "how he is doing"—in effect, to keep score
on the central player in the great American game of
politics.

Not only is standing in the polls our most
tangible measure of presidents' performance; it is
an active element of their power situation in Wash-
ington. As Richard Neustadt pointed out many years
ago, members of Congress, congressional staffs,
bureaucrats, top executive branch political ap-
pointees, interest groups and the press, all con-
stantly monitor the president's "public prestige"
and compare it with their own insiders' estimate of
how he is doing. The president is not like a British
prime minister—who can be quite unpopular at the
moment and still enjoy near-absolute control of
Westminster (exactly the case with Mrs. Thatcher
now). He needs both popular approval and the
respect (even the fear) of the Washingtonians if he
is to leave his mark on a recalcitrant governance
community characterized by separated powers and
weak, undisciplined political parties.

All modern presidents have understood this.
Lyndon Johnson was famous for brandishing the
latest favorable polls in the face of friend and foe
alike. Ronald Reagan put his own unique stylistic
twist on the subject when in 1982 he greeted
Richard Wirthlin's bad news on his sagging job
approval ratings with the one-liner: "Well, I could
always get shot again" (a reference to the upward
blip in his job approval ratings after the attempt
on his life in the Spring of 1981). George Bush knows
he is riding high in the polls, and this seems to have
contributed to his overall self-confidence. Bush's
Gallup general job approval rating after eleven
months in office is higher than that of any president
since John F. Kennedy (See this issue’s Public
Opinion Report.) This is not lost on the Washington
community.

Lest we make too much of them, it is impor-
tant that we get the Bush job approval numbers in
perspective. The Gallup question permits extensive
historical comparison, since it has been asked in
exactly the same way since 1938. We must use
extreme caution in interpreting survey responses
over such a long period in which many things about
American politics have changed. Still, there is
much to be learned by comparing the last ten presi-
dents' approval ratings. The accompanying table
shows annual Gallup job approval from 1938
through 1989. By looking across the rows of the
table we can see each president's job rating from his
first to last year in office. By looking up and down
we can see how his record compares with that of
others at the same point in the presidential term
cycle.

If they are interpreted correctly, these
numbers have a lot to say. As the first column of the
table shows for everyone since Roosevelt (who had
no Gallup ratings before 1938), presidents gener-
ally do well with the public in their first year.
Every president has done better in his first year
than his average over all years in office. In
Truman's case, the fall from grace is especially
striking—from 87% in 1945 to 30% in 1952.
Truman's championship first-year ratings have a
lot in common with Bush's high ratings since May.
(Bush's approval stood at 71% in the December
1989 Gallup survey.) Truman had not produced
the great national triumph of the war's end, any more
than Bush has brought about the dissolution of the
Soviet empire and the current strong performance
of the American economy that now boost his public
approval.

"Truman, Johnson, Nixon and Carter show
the 'failure pattern' that many political
scientists wrongly supposed had become
institutionalized by the late 1970s. The
Reagan case clearly shows that it had not
been."

Looking across each row of the table, we see
that there is nothing like a standard pattern of
presidential popularity; every case is different.
Roosevelt did not achieve his highest ratings before
the coming of the war. Ike and JFK hold fairly steady
across their terms.

Truman, Johnson, Nixon and Carter show
the "failure pattern" that many political scientists
wrongly supposed had become institutionalized by
the late 1970s. The Reagan case clearly shows that
it had not been. Starting lower than any previous
### GALLUP PRESIDENTIAL APPROVAL RATINGS:
YEARNLY AVERAGE FOR ALL PRESIDENTS, FDR TO GEORGE BUSH
BY YEAR IN OFFICE

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*Average of 13 surveys through December 1989.
president, Reagan remained low at the end of his first year. Yet, by 1986 he was riding high in the polls at about 65% before Iran-contra brought him back to the low 50s.

What these data tell us when they are put in proper perspective is that the Gallup question measures what the public takes to be presidential performance. The modern president is expected to do many things—among them, symbolize the nation, accomplish national purposes abroad, formulate domestic policies, maintain prosperity, lead his party, and, perhaps most of all, articulate a certain vision of where the nation needs to go at the time. The Gallup ratings measure the public’s sense of success or failure in carrying out these difficult role expectations. Presidential job approval is mainly what social scientists call a dependent variable. The presidents in the table whose ratings fall into the lower depths are there because the public has thought that one or more of the really important things—the economy, foreign/military policy, or general standards of governmental decency and comity—had gone amiss on their watch. The presidency is not a popularity contest. We have made too much of presidential popularity as an independent variable. Yes, success breeds success, but approval ratings are based on performance. There is no way that presidents can hoist themselves up if things are not perceived to be going well.

"The presidents in the table whose ratings fall into the lower depths are there because the public has thought that one or more of the really important things—the economy, foreign/military policy, or general standards of governmental decency and comity—had gone amiss on their watch. The presidency is not a popularity contest."

Above all else we need to see that the job approval numbers are only part of a really successful presidency. Roosevelt and Reagan tell us that this is so. Their exceptional vision, legislative leadership and impact on the polity—their agenda-setting ability—are not apparent in the job approval numbers alone. Strong presidents as formulators of ideas and programs generate intense partisanship. That is why the rich went to the Trans-Lux to hiss Roosevelt in the famous New Yorker cartoon and why Reagan’s job approval was unusually low among the less fortunate, blacks and women. Real leadership divides, and it pulls the job approval numbers down. This is only one of many paradoxes surrounding the presidency—a unique office in a unique polity.

"Strong presidents as formulators of ideas and programs generate intense partisanship. That is why the rich went to the Trans-Lux to hiss Roosevelt in the famous New Yorker cartoon and why Reagan’s job approval was unusually low among the less fortunate, blacks and women. Real leadership divides..."

George Bush is now much more popular than Ronald Reagan at the same moment in his term. Yet, I would argue, his impressive public standing is mainly the product of his predecessor’s success. Reagan more than any president in memory understood that the presidency is our only national institution capable of generating leadership and direction. Bush would do well to understand this. Reagan amply demonstrated that the presidency can work. After so much failure we had begun to doubt it. Now, it is Mr. Bush’s turn.

W. Wayne Shannon is professor of political science at the University of Connecticut.

"BUILD A BETTER MOUSETRAP, AND..."

Here is a list of some different products. Would you read down that list and call off those that you own?

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**NOTE:** Surveys by the Roper Organization. Question wording varied slightly over the years.

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