

**AMERICAN POLITICS AND  
CAMPAIGN '90:  
INTERVIEW WITH GEOFF GARIN**

**Public Perspective:** In an interview conducted earlier this year, Peter Hart told us that his surveys showed the national mood positive. But at the same time, he described a swing away from acceptance of the status quo, toward a more activist cycle. Do your more recent studies confirm this picture?

**Geoff Garin:** We've experienced a real transition in the political mood over the past six months. For a long while pollsters have been noting a lot of nervousness and anger beneath the surface of public opinion, but in the past half year the anxieties and frustrations have really come to the surface. We're seeing substantial changes in attitudes in the direction of increased pessimism, from border to border and coast to coast.

This increase in pessimism has a clear economic component. The slow growth in the economy that we've seen over the past year has hit home with public opinion. People see a more stagnant economic situation, and they are clearly more worried about it. We are picking up a very strong sense of a "middle class squeeze" -- middle class voters saying that on necessities like health care and insurance, housing and utilities, costs are rising faster than incomes. On a whole range of pocketbook issues, people are starting to feel pinched. This creates much more of an *economic* middle class mentality, as opposed to the *cultural* middle class outlook which the Republicans have been exploiting for several years.

A second level of frustration has to do with government and the political system. There is an increasing sense that government is not functioning effectively, not recognizing the problems of the middle class or solving their problems. There is a feeling that the political system is essentially out of touch and unresponsive to the needs of

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average families, that there's far too much thumb-twiddling going on in Washington.

**PP:** Incumbents have done very well in recent years. Are you saying this year might be different — that voters might now decide to “throw the rascals out”?

**GG:** We have been looking at “vote-to-re-elect scores” for the past dozen years. This year our vote-to-reelect scores are down on the average 10 points or more from where they'd been in the past three elections. This is likely to be a year when the voters are much less inclined to give incumbents the benefit of the doubt; the “burden of proof” is falling on the incumbent — to show that he or she has been part of the solution, rather than on the challenger to demonstrate that the incumbent's been part of the problem. Incumbents who are attentive to the shifting public mood ought to be able to deal with this. Good incumbents will get re-elected. But they will go at it very differently than in the past. The 1990 elections will be a lot less about clout and seniority and power in Washington, and a lot more about fighting for the people back home. We are seeing and will continue to see many incumbents trying to figure out new and creative ways to separate themselves from the institution of Congress.

**PP:** Are some groups especially inclined to turn against incumbents?

**GG:** The most important factor here is economic discomfort. The anti-incumbent feeling is prevalent around the country and among various constituencies, but it really becomes engaged when people feel economic pressure in their own lives. So blue-collar people are especially likely to be a harder sell for incumbents. In recession-bound states, incumbents have to run harder. But, ironically, a lot of them have been doing that for a while and they may turn out OK. It's also an irony of this situation where cynicism and pessimism are so pervasive that in some respects challengers as well as incumbents are affected. This is a very hard political environment in which to be a white hat; as soon as you become a candidate for office, even as a challenger, you become suspect in voters' minds to some extent. Voters are tarring all politicians with the same brush. Still, this is going to take the biggest toll on incumbents....

There are clearly a number of competitive Senate elections. But the real test is the so-called “challenge-proof” House of Representatives, where the extraordinary reelection rates are often cited as evidence that there is permanent incumbent protection. Changes are not going to happen in anything close to a majority of races, maybe not even a large minority, but many more House seats are at play in 1990 than in quite a while.

**PP:** Are any contests you're watching especially interesting because of these developments?

**GG:** Members of the House who have been touched by S & L problems are interesting test cases to watch. In the Senate, of course, a lot more of the “vulnerables” are up for re-election in 1992. This year, there are Democrats who are really running populist campaigns on democratic change themes -- and they are also important indicators of where we're headed politically....The fact is that people were willing to put up with what they understood to be inequities in the Eighties as long as there was continued economic growth, but now that the growth has stopped class antagonisms are becoming a lot more important politically.

**PP:** What impact are the various social issues having now?

**GG:** Of all the issues that are being debated in 1990, none moves as many votes as the issue of choice. The impact has been almost one-sidedly to the advantage of pro-choice candidates — which for the most part means the Democrats' advantage. One of the consequences of the 1990 election season is that the Republican party is going to rethink its position on the choice issue. Those Republicans who were strongly anti-choice when the Supreme Court protected them from doing anything about it are in a highly exposed position politically. Republican leaders recognize they cannot remain the anti-choice party. As long as they've got candidates left who are, they are going to take on water on this issue.

**PP:** I'm an incumbent facing the last few months prior to the November election: What advice do you have for me?

**GG:** The most important thing for incumbents at this stage is to attach themselves to their home areas and not to Washington, DC. The more they are seen as creatures of Washington rather than of their home districts — the more they are going to be in trouble. Secondly, incumbents need to recognize that this is partly due to voters' wanting to know that the office holders understand what they are going through. This campaign is an opportunity to develop ways of demonstrating sympathetic knowledge and understanding of the people's concerns. Finally, the central question for many incumbents now is, “Whose side are you on?” They must find ways of making clear they are on the people's side and fighting for the middle class. More than proclaiming themselves *against* the rich and powerful, candidates need to show they really are *committed* to the average person.

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