

KILL ALL THE POLLSTERS? AN ALTERNATE HIT LIST FOR THE 1992 CAMPAIGN

By Richard Morin

Let's face it—the lesson of the 1988 presidential campaign was that politics is too important to be left in the hands of political reporters. So, rather than suggest that polls should play a diminished role in 1992, let me offer the politically incorrect proposition that America's media pollsters should be more active—not less—next year.

That may sound like self-serving lunacy. After all, 1992 is shaping up to be one of the duller campaigns in recent memory. Two out of three voters currently approve of the job that President Bush is doing as president. The economy is drifting out of recession. The coup in the Soviet Union has failed. Even Dan Quayle is getting some favorable press from his recent lawyer-bashing homily before the American Bar Association. The result is a paucity of Democratic hopefuls willing to challenge Bush; the *New Republic* calls this, "The Wimps Factor." Remember the seven dwarfs of 1988? Well, current conventional wisdom argues that those men were giants compared to Paul Tsongas and Tom Harkin. So the obvious question: Why poll when the outcome is so certain?

The first reason is straightforward enough. All this could change quickly and unexpectedly. And there are a few hints of vulnerability that raise the possibility—though not the probability—that 1992 could become interesting. "The probability is that Bush will have an easy go of it," said University of Michigan political scientist Michael Traugott. "The tough question is to guess whether some low-probability events could potentially become devastating. They would include the residual of Iran-Contra and the 1980 campaign..., the savings and loan scandal, BCCI, and the general health of the financial system, which could be converted quite easily into a partisan issue."

But who cares if the campaign is boring? That may be the best thing that could happen to polling and political reporting. Free from the constraints of horserace polling, political reporters and pollsters and yes, even the candidates, may be free to look beyond the ballot test to rediscover the voter in 1992. More about that later. First, an overview of the way one pollster sees the next political season.

Phase One: Seeking the Nomination

The 1992 campaign can be divided into three pieces. We're in the early days of the first phase, which includes the primaries and ends when each party has selected a candidate. There's little doubt who the Republican nominee will be, which means political coverage and polling will focus on the

Democrats. Most nominations are typically wrapped up by the middle of March. But Traugott and other political observers predict that this might not be the case this year. The result should be to increase the value of national polls. These surveys will be needed to describe how the results of primaries around the country are playing nationally to see how—and whether—one of the 1992 Dwarfs can cobble together a national constituency within the party before the convention.

Phase Two: The Conventions

The second and briefer phase is highlighted by the conventions. These offer real opportunities through a combination of public and delegate polls to see how closely party activists—the delegates—reflect the views of the rank-and-file. Both parties, but especially the Democrats, have suffered from a wide gulf between their elites and rank-and-files on a number of key social and economic issues. Will this condition persist in 1992? National polling organizations may want to pocket some money in case the convention begins without a clearly identified nominee. Politics and polling could get exceedingly interesting during a brokered convention. And, of course, the conventions will be the time when each candidate's position on key issues will become clear, which offers obvious possibilities for issues polls.

Phase Three: The Stretch Run

Then comes the general election campaign. My guess is that broad themes—the issues that really matter, politics and its place in American life—may be among the polling subjects of choice, particularly early in the campaign. My corollary fear, though, is that after a few half-hearted, thumb-sucking pokes at the Big Picture, major media organizations will become bored and begin to feed a little lower on the political food chain, seeking controversial gubernatorial, Senate and key House races to fill the vacuum left by the presidential campaign.

It's also my guess that the financially strapped networks and some newspapers may lose their taste for polling, particularly after the Democratic nomination is sewn up. The networks love the horserace question far above all others, even more so than their colleagues in newspapers who have the luxury of space and a mandate to provide something beyond what TV can provide. The rough financial times for newspapers and TV stations will have an impact on local polling as well, with the inevitable result being fewer polls and more polling consortiums organized by private polling organizations, particularly if primary and pre-convention polls drain the major news media's polling budgets.

Voices of the People

Next year, poll stories will—or should—change. Gone, happily, are the days that a poll story can merely be 800 words and a chart! The voices of real people are being heard with

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increasing frequency in poll stories. And these voices may be even more apparent in 1992, when few people will care what the consultants or even perhaps what the candidates themselves are saying. At the Washington Post, David Broder has launched a one-person campaign to put people back into politics, a concern based, in part, on his growing sense that American politics and government has drifted far away from the governed. The Post is always looking for new ways to insert people into poll stories: focus groups; door-knocking in selected precincts; in-depth re-interviews with survey respondents. All likely will be used again in 1992.

Another way to put more people into polling projects is something I dubbed the "Wall of Quotes," a version of which ran recently in conjunction with a local survey on the impact of guns and gun violence in the metropolitan Washington DC area. The "wall" was a full printed page of verbatim responses to an open-ended question that asked people to recall recent experiences they had with gun violence in the past three years in the Washington area. The result was more than 300 brief stories out of 1,000 persons interviewed, itself a chilling result. About fifty of the best were used, one right after another, with respondents identified only by their gender, age, and county of residence. The cumulative impact of these vignettes, each about three or four sentences long and told in the jingle-jangle language of real people, was overwhelming.

Which brings me to a beef I have with my fellow journalists. While reporters love to bash the polls, they should realize that polling is reporting. Instead of a few sources, pollsters interview 1,000 or more real people—the kinds that never manage to find their way into our stories.

Money is Politics

In addition to listening to the people, pollsters and political reporters might spend a bit more time reading the business section next year. And they should pay particular attention to one of the deceptively straightforward but powerfully predictive poll questions. For more than 30 years, Gallup has asked this question of the American public: "Looking ahead for the next few years, which political party—the Republicans or the Democrats—do you think will do the better job of keeping the country prosperous?" Throughout the past two decades, the candidate from the party that the public believed was more likely to deliver the economic goods generally has captured the White House.

Again next year, factors that traditionally have won presidential elections—the state of the economy and the public's perception of how the party in the White House had been doing—will likely dominate. The importance of those two variables was demonstrated four years ago, when political scientists using relatively simple mathematical models of electoral behavior predicted the election outcome months in advance. In June of 1988, Dukakis was still riding high in the

polls, but a model developed by Greg Markus of the University of Michigan predicted that Bush would win with 54% of the vote (He won with 53.37%). A September prediction by Michigan's Steven Rosenstone missed by two-tenths of a percentage point. And Richard Brody of Stanford forecast a Bush win with 54.4% of the vote using a model that had only two variables: presidential approval rating and changes in personal disposable income. Sadly, though, the economy probably will receive short shrift next election among many political reporters. Why? A big part of the answer is that economics is boring to most nonbusiness reporters. Besides, the structural underpinnings of most presidential elections is a story that's easily drowned out by the white noise of the campaign.

New in '92

What else should we do differently in 1992? The answer isn't to kill all polls or pollsters—which would merely give politics back to the pundits and consultants. Nor do we necessarily need to cut back on the number of polls that are done. "I don't know if we need fewer polls," Warren Mitofsky, director of Voter Research Service, the networks' exit poll consortium, recently said. "But we do need better polls." Amen. Ironically, the sad state of media finances may produce precisely the wrong result: Fewer and lower-quality polls.

Political reporters and pollsters also need to get back on the sidelines. It continues to amaze me how close many journalists have gotten to the political players. Now, media pollsters are sleeping with the enemy. The fact that the president's pollster, Bob Teeter, and Democratic consultant and pollster Peter Hart collaborate on the NBC News/Wall Street Journal national surveys troubles me. Both men are scrupulously honest. But they should not be doing media polling at the same time they're doing partisan politics.

Political journalism must purge itself of conventional wisdom. And polls remain among the most effective weapons to use against conventional wisdom or the enthusiasms of the moment. Consider the misdirected punditry that followed Jesse Jackson's victory in the Michigan caucuses that sprang up because there were no exit polls to characterize Jackson's vote accurately.

I also remember that four years ago, I was told that the presidential campaign doesn't start until Labor Day. So I went on vacation immediately after the Republican Convention in August with Dukakis with a lead in the polls. When I came back soon after Labor Day, Bush was on top and the campaign was largely over (Memo to file: Take no vacation next year.)

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