

# THE POLLS AND THE 1992 ELECTIONS LESSONS LEARNED

*By Humphrey Taylor and David Krane*

The definitive accounts of the 1992 election are yet to be written. It's already clear, though, that a lot of interesting things happened. We've learned a number of things about the contest itself, and about the way the polls were conducted and reported, which are worth noting.

## **The Timing of Perot's Decisions Was Critical**

Every election has its "What if's." In this election we could ask: What if George Bush had never made his "read my lips" pledge in 1988? Would he still have beaten Dukakis? And would increasing taxes in 1991 still have hurt? What if Casper Weinberger's notes, so damaging to Bush's credibility, had not been released four days before the election, at a time when Bush seemed to be gaining because of his attacks on Clinton's character and the "trust issue"? What if the economic good news which we have heard since the election had come through one month earlier? What if Perot had not gone on "60-Minutes" accusing the Republicans of trying to disrupt his daughter's wedding?

Who knows? But in this election the Ross Perot factor introduced some really big hypotheticals. The timing of his emergence as a potential candidate and his—as it turned out, temporary—withdrawal from the election were probably decisive. He came into the race at a time when both Bush and Clinton were in trouble, but when Bush still enjoyed a substantial lead over a badly bruised (many thought, fatally damaged) Clinton. Perot quickly took large numbers of votes from both candidates, moving ahead of the President and leaving him much more vulnerable.

Next, the timing of Perot's withdrawal from his, still unannounced, candidacy, gave Clinton a huge lift. He dropped out at precisely the time Clinton was beginning his surge, at the beginning of the successful Democratic convention and before the Clinton-Gore bus-stop tour. Clinton's subsequent rise was quite extraordinary. He moved in the Harris polls from 9 points behind Bush to 30 points ahead of him—by far the biggest election bounce since polls began to measure these things. From that point on, it was Bill Clinton's election to lose. How much of this was the result of the timing of Perot's departure is unclear, but we believe it was a powerful factor.

## **A Surprise: The Year of the Negatives Produced a Happier Electorate and an Increase in Turnout**

For much of the year we, and other pollsters, emphasized the negatives. Confidence in leaders and especially in politicians plumbed new depths. Our Harris Alienation Index was higher than ever before in its 26-year history. The Keating Five, congressional post office and banking scandals, and the Clarence Thomas-Anita Hill hearings, were all grist for the negative mill. When the Democrats nominated a badly bruised Bill Clinton who trailed both Bush and Perot, it all seemed like more bad news for the political process. In the summer we, like others, talked of turnout possibly falling below 50%.

In any event, we were dead wrong. Turnout was up (even if, believe it or not, we still can't get a definitive measure of exactly how many people voted for all the

presidential candidates). And the polls showed that, compared to the recent past, people enjoyed this election more. Ross Perot probably deserves much of the credit. He certainly contributed many of the surprises and a lot of the humor. His "infomercials" were viewed and enjoyed by huge audiences, to the surprise of most pundits. Perhaps the fact that the election itself was not as nasty as that in 1988 helped.

## **The Left-Right-Center "Who's to Blame?" Argument Within the Republican Party Misses the Real Point**

President Bush lost the election because of the economy, and because more voters thought that Governor Clinton would get the economy moving, create jobs and address the other issues of greatest importance to them (especially the health care issue). Bush did not lose it because he swung too far to the right or because he wobbled towards the center. However, these facts won't deter the ongoing debate and soul-searching within the Republican Party.

The right argues that Bush betrayed the Reagan legacy—that he signed a quota bill, raised taxes, regulated business, etc. The center argues that the gay-bashing, Hillary-taunting, Republican convention was a disaster. In truth, they are both half-right. Bush would obviously have been better placed if he had not made, and then broken, his "read my lips" pledge (arguably he would have won comfortably in 1988 if he had not made it). The Republican convention surely did turn some people off—but not enough to prevent a normal-sized convention bounce in his favor.

## **Voter Volatility and the Erosion of Party Loyalty Continued to Increase**

This election saw huge swings of opinion and support, which are part of a long-term trend. As party loyalties have eroded and ticket-splitting has increased, so volatility has grown. In no previous election has a third-party candidate run ahead of both the Democratic and Republican candidates, as Ross Perot did for a while in the late spring. In no previous election has any candidate ever received a "convention bounce" which came close in size to what Clinton achieved.

In a mid-July Harris Poll, we found only 29% of all adults wanting a "continuation of the two-party system of Democrats and Republicans." A virtually identical number (30%), preferred "the growth of one or more new parties that could effectively challenge the Democrats and Republicans," while the largest number, 38%, opted for "election in which candidates run as individuals without party labels." Unlike some other commentators, we do not believe that the public will necessarily get what it wants—the end of party politics, or even the end of two-party politics. But we do believe that party loyalties have reached a new low, that voter volatility will continue to increase, and that future elections will see even wilder swings than we saw in this election.

## **The Gay Vote Became a Factor, Possibly for the First Time**

We don't believe we have an accurate measure of the vote of homosexuals. Less than 3% of males and far fewer females self-identify as gay or lesbian in the few polls that ask this question, but there are reasons to believe the true numbers are substantially higher. We do know that 28% of all likely voters report having "close personal friends who are gay or lesbian," and that while this is surely much larger than the number of homosexuals, it represents a huge block of voters who may be influenced by the way the candidates and the parties address issues related to gay rights and discrimination.

In this election, the Republican convention did its best to alienate homosexuals and their friends, while Bill Clinton reached out to include them. As a result, the gay vote—however inaccurately measured and defined—went strongly for Clinton. In our October 2-4 Harris Poll, the 28% of likely voters who had close personal friends who were homosexual reported a Clinton lead which was 18 percentage points larger than his lead in the country as a whole.

## **The Media—and the Pollsters Themselves—Did a Lousy Job of Reporting the Poll Results**

Robert Worcester (Public Perspective, November/December 1992) is absolutely right. The media reported the polls without regard to their quality and often reported them in ways which added to the confusion as much as they informed. And they even got the numbers wrong—the poll numbers and even, can you believe it, the result (i.e., the percentage of the vote for each candidate). There was a lot of just plain sloppy reporting.

In his Public Perspective commentary, even Bob Worcester's numbers were wrong: Wrong on what the polls said, wrong on the actual result and wrong on the polls' errors. Why? Because he relied, not unreasonably for someone living in London, on the numbers published in the American media. Virtually all the media ignored the fact that about one percent of the votes went to "other" candidates. So did all the polls except Harris. We found and reported one percent who said they would vote for "other" candidates. So, we assume, did the other polls. Why didn't they even bother to report it?

Does this matter? We think sloppy counting leads to sloppy reporting. Perhaps it's all sour grapes, because it certainly matters to us. As a result of the faulty information available through the media, Worcester and Public Perspective reported our error, on the gap between Clinton and Bush, as 2.0 percentage points when it was actually 0.5. This suggested we only "tied for honors" on election day when in fact we were the closest.

## **Exit Polls, in the US at Least, Are Not More Reliable Than Pre-election Polls**

How many Public Perspective readers realize that we don't know how accurate the exit polls were or what they were "predicting" on election day? Like many others we assumed, before this election, that exit polls were more accurate than pre-election polls because they don't face the problems of differential turnout (and turnout screens) or late swing. We were therefore troubled by the massive failure of the exit polls in New Hampshire. Even more troubling was the substantial overestimation of the Clinton margin on November 3rd.

In other countries, where the polls all close at the same time, exit-poll results are published before any results come in, and stand or fall by their accuracy. And in most other countries they are very accurate. The only exit poll data that are published here are weighted to the actual results, and used only for analysis of group comparisons, and the like. [Editor's note: The interviews with Warren Mitofsky and John Brennan in this issue are a useful step in addressing these concerns.]

## **Again the Media Emphasis on the "Margin of Error" Was Silly and Misleading**

Every time we are asked "what is the margin of error" in our polls we roll our eyes and gnash our teeth. If we were honest, we would answer that in theory it is infinite, that we have no idea what the margin of error is and we wish we knew. When we tell reporters it's a stupid question, they tell us their editors insist on reporting the answer—so we give them one. The answers we and all the pollsters give the media are totally misleading. We all know that the most serious sources of error in polls are the things we don't talk about and some we can't begin to estimate—non-response bias, sample design and weighting factors, interviewer bias and error, question wording, question order, screening techniques, etc.

## Projecting the Electoral College Vote From the Popular: The Pundits "Just Don't Get It"

Psephologists in other countries—the UK's David Butler in particular—figured out something which most Americans find very hard to accept: If you know the popular vote nationally, you can make a pretty reliable estimate of how the electoral college votes will come out. There is a widespread misconception that the electoral college vote is somehow almost independent of the national vote. Every four years, particularly close to elections, there are seriously argued columns telling us to ignore the national polls because they only measure the national vote, and to look at the individual states.

Even if we had really good and timely poll data in the individual states (and we only have them for a very few), relying on them would be a mistake. While there are substantial differences in how much individual states swing to, or from, Democrat to Republican, between consecutive elections, the overall distribution of this swing is not far from a normal distribution. The swing from Republican to Democrat between 1988 to 1992 varied from +17% in Arkansas, to -1% in Iowa and North Dakota, but the great majority of states swung by between 5 and 10%. The mean was just over 7%. Based on our final national poll, showing a six-point lead, we estimated that Clinton would win "between 380 and 405 electoral college votes." We didn't base this on state polls. We didn't say

which states Clinton would win. We just assumed a normal distribution of swing.

In the final analysis, we were a little high on Clinton's lead (6 points instead of 5.5); hence, we were also a little high on his share of the electoral college vote. [Clinton won 370 electoral votes.] But the surprising thing to us is that no other pollsters even attempted to make the calculation because they, like most pundits, don't believe you can project the electoral college decision from the national vote.

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# THE PERFORMANCE OF THE GALLUP TRACKING POLL: THE MYTH AND THE REALITY

*By Larry Hugick, Guy Molyneux,  
and Jim Norman*

What really happened in the final weeks of the 1992 presidential campaign? Had the vast majority of voters already made up their minds before this critical period, or did a large segment of still-deciding voters leave the election outcome in doubt? If there were late shifts in candidate support, were they precipitated by campaign-related events or by other factors?

These same questions have been asked about other presidential races of the last three decades—Reagan/Carter in 1980, Carter/Ford in 1976, Nixon/Humphrey in 1968 and Kennedy/Nixon in 1960. Before 1992, however, those searching for answers were frustrated by incomplete polling data. Information had to be drawn from various sources, some employing dissimilar methodologies. Often, there were gaps of several days for which no figures at all were available.

This year was different. For the first time in the history of presidential election polling in the US, new information was available every day at the end of the campaign from three independent sources. The Gallup Organization tracked the race for CNN and USA Today. The ABC News polling unit provided daily figures for its network. A third tracking poll, Battleground '92, was conducted by the Tarrance Group and carried by various media around the country.

All three tracking polls showed essentially the same picture of the race in the final week: It tightened dramatically as George Bush moved to within striking distance of the lead, then widened enough at the end for Bill Clinton to win by a modest, but comfortable, margin.

This valuable glimpse of voter volatility in the campaign's homestretch has

been obscured, however, by a cloud of post-election commentary by poll critics who would have us believe that this narrowing of the race in the final week never happened. Their influence was felt one week after the election, when Newsweek's "Conventional Wisdom" page included the following item under the heading of "polls": "Race never got as close as some said." They struck again in the November/December issue of Public Perspective, when Michael Traugott referred to the tightening of the race as "a developing folklore about the 1992 campaign" (p. 15).

## The Race Did Tighten

It's important to set the record straight. The race did tighten, getting into the too-close-to-call range. And then, it did widen again at the end. Interviews conducted Saturday and Sunday, October 24-25, in