

DECISION '92: A STATE POLLING PERSPECTIVE

By J. Bradford Coker

During the 1992 election cycle, most of the poll results reported in the press were ones based on national samples. Designed to approximate the entire US electorate, they did not yield reliable state-by-state assessments. There were a number of state or regional polls, but because they utilized different methodologies and question wordings, state-by-state comparisons were made more difficult or impossible. To provide good, comparable state data, Political/Media Research (PMR) created its "Electoral College Tracking Service" (ECTS). ECTS comprised surveys within every state, using a standard methodology and identical question wordings. Some of the results are reported below. Individual state surveys were sponsored by local television stations and newspapers, and contained state-specific questions beyond the common core.

The ECTS design took into account the fact that presidents are elected state-by-state (or, in the case of Maine and Nebraska, district-by-district); it included two surveys in each state during the time between the Republican Convention and Election Day. The first round of polling began in late August and was completed by September 30. Each state-wide benchmark poll was of 400 to 800 likely November voters. Ross Perot's name was on the ballot in most states and he had not absolutely ruled out an active candidacy. We decided, then, to include

in all of our August and September surveys not only a two-way (Bush-Clinton) but also a three-way (Bush-Clinton-Perot) presidential preference question. This proved to be a crucial decision with Perot's re-entry on October 1.

At the end of the first wave, PMR staff classified each state into one of five categories: "Likely Clinton," "Likely Bush," "Leaning Clinton," "Leaning

clear history of past Democratic voting. "Competitive" states also tended to show Clinton leads (but smaller, in the 1 to 5% range) and had little or no recent Democratic presidential voting.

A Commanding Clinton Lead in the Electoral College

On October 1, PMR released the initial polls, including the state-by-state classifications, shown below. In a three-way contest, 24 states (with a total of 302 electoral votes) were classified as either likely for or leaning to Clinton. Eight states (70 electoral votes) were in the Bush camp. No states were leaning to Perot. The remainder—18 states with 166 electoral votes—were judged competitive.

Although the first round of polling had been intended largely to establish benchmarks, its results basically held up through election day. Of the 25 states in the Clinton columns, only 1 (South Dakota) wound up going for

Bush. Only 1 of the 8 Bush states (New Hampshire) eventually went for Clinton. The situation after the first wave presented a marked contrast to 1988. Michael Dukakis led in most national polls in August, but an evaluation of state-by-state polls during that period would probably have shown George Bush much closer than Dukakis to the 270 electoral vote threshold. This year, looking at 51 individual polls that used identical sampling

Table 1
PMR's Classification of the 50 States' Presidential Leanings
(Polling of August-September, 1992)

| Likely for Clinton | Leaning to Clinton | Competitive | Leaning to Bush | Likely for Bush |
|--------------------|--------------------|---------------------|--------------------|-------------------|
| Arkansas (6) | Hawaii (4) | Texas (32) | New Hampshire (4) | Indiana (12) |
| Wisconsin (11) | Maryland (10) | North Carolina (14) | Florida (25) | Utah (5) |
| New York (33) | Tennessee (11) | Arizona (8) | Nebraska (5) | |
| Iowa (7) | California (54) | Ohio (21) | South Carolina (8) | |
| Minnesota (10) | Illinois (22) | Louisiana (9) | Oklahoma (8) | |
| West Virginia (5) | Washington (11) | Colorado (8) | Wyoming (3) | |
| DC (3) | Vermont (3) | Delaware (3) | | |
| Massachusetts (12) | Georgia (13) | Mississippi (7) | | |
| Rhode Island (4) | Pennsylvania (23) | Missouri (11) | Virginia (13) | |
| | | Michigan (18) | Alaska (3) | |
| | | New Jersey (15) | Kentucky (8) | |
| | | South Dakota (3) | Kansas (6) | |
| | | Connecticut (8) | Alabama (9) | |
| | | Maine (4) | Montana (3) | |
| | | New Mexico (5) | Idaho (4) | |
| | | Oregon (7) | Nevada (4) | |
| | | | North Dakota (3) | |
| (91 votes) | (211 votes) | (166 votes) | (53 votes) | (17 votes) |

Bush," or "Competitive." The classifications were based on past voting history, the current polling results, and the judgment of PMR staff.¹ All of the states classified as "Likely Clinton" had a double digit lead for the Democratic nominee and had actually voted for the Democratic nominee at least once in the past few elections. Those "Leaning Clinton" tended to have the Democrats ahead by margins in the 6 to 12% range, and to have less

Table 2
Senatorial Job Ratings
Based on Individual State Surveys (August 21-September 29)

| | EXCL GOOD | FAIR POOR | | EXCL GOOD | FAIR POOR |
|-------------------------|----------------------|----------------------|----------------------------|----------------------|----------------------|
| Trent Lott (R-MS) | 80% | 17% | Jake Garn (R-UT) | 52% | 42% |
| Albert Gore (D-TN) | 79% | 20% | Daniel Moynihan (D-NY) | 52% | 37% |
| Robert Byrd (D-WV) | 72% | 26% | Mitch McConnell (R-KY) | 52% | 42% |
| Thad Cochran (R-MS) | 72% | 24% | Paul Simon (D-IL) | 52% | 46% |
| Warren Rudman (R-NH) | 69% | 26% | Terry Sanford (D-NC) | 51% | 41% |
| Pete Domenici (R-NM) | 69% | 27% | Daniel Inouye (D-HI) | 51% | 49% |
| Kent Conrad (D-SD) | 69% | 27% | Orrin Hatch (R-UT) | 50% | 47% |
| Sam Nunn (D-GA) | 68% | 29% | Frank Murkowski (R-AK) | 50% | 49% |
| David Boren (D-OK) | 68% | 28% | Max Baucus (D-MT) | 50% | 48% |
| George Mitchell (D-ME) | 68% | 28% | J. Bennett Johnston (D-LA) | 50% | 45% |
| Strom Thurmond (R-SC) | 67% | 32% | Ted Stevens (R-AK) | 49% | 50% |
| William Cohen (R-ME) | 67% | 25% | Connie Mack (R-FL) | 49% | 39% |
| Nancy Kassebaum (R-KS) | 66% | 30% | Christopher Bond (R-MO) | 49% | 48% |
| Joe Biden (D-DE) | 65% | 32% | Herb Kohl (D-WI) | 49% | 42% |
| James Exon (D-NE) | 65% | 32% | Wyche Fowler (D-GA) | 48% | 45% |
| Bill Bradley (D-NJ) | 64% | 31% | Richard Shelby (D-AL) | 48% | 44% |
| Bob Kerrey (D-NE) | 64% | 36% | Daniel Akaka (D-HI) | 48% | 49% |
| Richard Lugar (R-IN) | 63% | 35% | Larry Craig (R-ID) | 48% | 45% |
| John Kerry (D-MA) | 63% | 32% | Tom Harkin (D-IA) | 46% | 49% |
| Bob Dole (R-KS) | 62% | 36% | Hank Brown (R-CO) | 46% | 46% |
| Jay Rockefeller (D-WV) | 62% | 37% | Steven Symms (R-ID) | 46% | 49% |
| Christopher Dodd (D-CT) | 62% | 37% | Bob Smith (R-NH) | 45% | 38% |
| Tom Daschle (D-SD) | 62% | 34% | Jesse Helms (R-NC) | 44% | 55% |
| Claiborne Pell (D-RI) | 61% | 37% | Paul Sarbanes (D-MD) | 44% | 44% |
| David Pryor (D-AR) | 60% | 34% | Slade Gorton (R-WA) | 44% | 49% |
| Chuck Grassley (R-IA) | 60% | 36% | Dan Coats (R-IN) | 43% | 48% |
| Dale Bumpers (D-AR) | 60% | 37% | John McCain (R-AZ) | 43% | 54% |
| Alan Simpson (R-WY) | 60% | 37% | John Glenn (D-OH) | 43% | 54% |
| Harry Reid (D-NV) | 59% | 38% | Richard Bryan (D-NV) | 42% | 49% |
| Barbara Mikulski (D-MD) | 59% | 36% | Frank Lautenberg (D-NJ) | 42% | 47% |
| John Chafee (R-RI) | 58% | 37% | Paul Wellstone (D-MN) | 42% | 50% |
| William Roth (R-DE) | 58% | 32% | Carl Levin (D-MI) | 41% | 47% |
| John Danforth (R-MO) | 58% | 38% | Timothy Wirth (D-CO) | 40% | 48% |
| Jim Sasser (D-TN) | 58% | 37% | Howard Metzenbaum (D-OH) | 40% | 57% |
| Bob Graham (D-FL) | 58% | 38% | Bob Packwood (R-OR) | 40% | 54% |
| Phil Gramm (R-TX) | 57% | 39% | Harris Woford (D-PA) | 39% | 40% |
| Larry Pressler (R-SD) | 57% | 38% | Conrad Burns (R-MT) | 38% | 58% |
| Joseph Lieberman (D-CT) | 57% | 30% | Dennis DeConcini (D-AZ) | 38% | 60% |
| John Breaux (D-LA) | 57% | 34% | Bob Kasten (R-WI) | 37% | 55% |
| John Warner (R-VA) | 56% | 35% | Mark Hatfield (R-OR) | 37% | 56% |
| Edward Kennedy (D-MA) | 56% | 41% | Alan Dixon (D-IL) | 37% | 57% |
| Wendell Ford (D-KY) | 56% | 37% | Dave Durenberger (R-MN) | 36% | 57% |
| Patrick Leahy (D-VT) | 55% | 39% | Howell Heflin (D-AL) | 36% | 59% |
| Ernest Hollings (D-SC) | 55% | 42% | Alfonse D'Amato (R-NY) | 35% | 58% |
| Lloyd Bentsen (D-TX) | 55% | 42% | Brock Adams (D-WA) | 35% | 58% |
| Don Nickles (R-OK) | 55% | 39% | Donald Riegle (D-MI) | 35% | 54% |
| Arlen Specter (R-PA) | 55% | 41% | Charles Robb (D-VA) | 31% | 59% |
| Jeff Bingaman (D-NM) | 54% | 39% | **Jocelyn Burdick (D-ND) | 22% | 26% |
| Malcolm Wallop (R-WY) | 54% | 42% | Alan Cranston (D-CA) | 21% | 74% |
| James Jeffords (R-VT) | 53% | 38% | John Seymour (R-CA) | 19% | 43% |

Question: How would you rate the performance of...as US senator: excellent, pretty good, only fair, or poor? **Note:** "Undecided" (not shown) was less than 10% for all cases except Roth (10%), Lieberman (13%), Moynihan (11%), Mack (12%), Smith (17%), Sarbanes (12%), Lautenberg (11%), Levin (12%), Wirth (12%), Wofford (21%), Riegle (11%), Robb (10%), Burdick (52%), and Seymour (38%). **Jocelyn Burdick was named interim senator on the death of her husband and did not seek election.

methods and questionnaire designs, Clinton seemed at the end of September to have enough electoral votes to win.

The individual state samples also offered the unique opportunity to undertake several other research tasks. Each state poll included an identical question rating Bush's job performance, that of the state's governor, and of two US senators. This made possible, for the first time, a complete ranking of governors' and senators' popularity among their own constituents, unaffected by differences in methodology or wording. [Editor's Note: Space does not permit a presentation of most of the extensive PMR state results, but the approval rankings of all 100 US senators holding office prior to the 1992 elections are shown in Table 2.]

The second round of state polling didn't begin in earnest until after the second presidential debate (October 15). Because their presidential outcomes seemed rather certain, and to conserve resources, Rhode Island, Massachusetts, the District of Columbia—all Democratic, and Utah—Republican, were not surveyed again in October.

Movement in October

Results showed that Perot's unfavorable name recognition dropped significantly after the first two presidential debates. In most states, however, this translated into only modest increases in support above the September benchmark levels. Several Clinton states tightened to the point where they were reclassified as "competitive," but the most significant finding was that many states (e.g., Alaska, Kansas, Arizona) that were part of the historic Republican electoral base had not moved to the Bush column. Also, a few of the states that had been in the Bush column in September (Florida, South Carolina, Mississippi, & Wyoming) slipped into the "competitive" category, as Perot's support cut more into the President's base and reduced his leads.

South Dakota moved from Clinton to "competitive" (and, as noted, eventually went for Bush). New Hampshire shifted

from Bush to "competitive" (and eventually went for Clinton). Texas, Idaho, Virginia, and North Dakota shifted from "competitive" to Bush, while Montana and Colorado moved from "competitive" to Clinton. As of October 30, PMR showed Clinton with 24 states (plus DC) totaling 284 electoral votes, Bush with 8 states totaling 80 electoral votes, Perot still with no states. Eighteen states (174 electoral votes) remained "competitive."

Individual state polls during the last week picked up some regional trends that helped us re-evaluate several states from which we had obtained results earlier in the month. In the South, "undecided" white voters appeared to be breaking for Bush, positioning him to carry the "competitive" southern states in which he held small leads (Florida, South Carolina, and Mississippi) or was running about even (North Carolina and Alabama). In the West, Perot's gains leveled-off in the final week, helping Bush in "competitive" states where he led (Kansas and Wyoming), as well as in several where he was running neck-and-neck with Clinton (Alaska, Arizona, and South Dakota).

Despite this trend, it was apparent, going into the final weekend, that for Bush to win he had to sweep the 18 "competitive" states and as well pry away 2 or 3 states from the Clinton column. Accomplishing the first objective was going to be very difficult, as that list included a number of states (Michigan, Ohio, New Jersey, Missouri, Delaware, and New Hampshire) outside of the southern and western regions where Bush's fortunes were improving. Trends in the Northeast and Midwest still favored Clinton.

PMR concluded that if a late surge were going to be strong enough to re-elect Bush, this trend would have to include significant movement to the President in Clinton's "softer" states. In the West, Perot's stall appeared to be helping Bush, and in the South, "undecided" whites were also moving to the Republican incumbent. Therefore, Kentucky, Tennessee, Georgia, New Mexico, Colorado, and Montana were targeted for final weekend

tracking. Wisconsin was also selected as the seventh Clinton state for inclusion in our final round, in response to speculation that the race might be tightening there. Most of these states showed some narrowing of the race, but only Kentucky and New Mexico moved out of the Clinton column and were reclassified as "competitive." Our final state-by-state classification showed Clinton with a base electoral college majority of 271.

Few Surprises

In the final result, all 22 states and the District of Columbia, that had been put in Clinton's column, went Democratic, while all 8 states classified for Bush voted for the President. The two major party candidates split the twenty competitive states right down the middle, ten each. More tellingly, of the ten competitive states that ultimately went for Clinton, the latest polling showed the Democrat ahead in nine, and trailing (but by a statistically insignificant amount) in the other. Conversely, Bush had led in five of the competitive states he finally won, and neither candidate had held a statistically significant lead in the five others.

Endnotes

¹ There was no rigid numerical formula applied. Staff looked at the size of the lead for one candidate or the other (including, of course, whether it exceeded the "margin of error") and the degree to which it was consonant with the outcome for the state in the recent past. All things being equal, a state with a strong history for one party or the other would be more likely to be classed as "likely" for that party than would another state with identical poll results. Similarly, of two states with identical histories, the one with a clearer lead in the polls for a candidate would be more likely to be put in that candidate's "likely" column.

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