

# CANDIDATE IMAGES IN THE 1992 CAMPAIGN

By Ed Goeas and Brian C. Tringali

The 1992 election has been termed "the year of the talk show" in terms of candidate tactics, but it may be more correctly remembered as the year in which presidential candidates were able to transform their popular standing over time. Voters were willing to forget, if not forgive, almost any transgression—save for incumbency. Or, rather, it may be that only one "transgression" really mattered: Bush's presiding over what was seen as a troubled economy.

The Tarrance Group conducted what we believe merits recognition as the most accurate tracking survey in the country, known as the "Battleground '92" poll. In the course of it, we interviewed nearly

15,000 persons. The work provides an interesting look at the images of the three presidential candidates over time. Both Clinton and Perot were "reborn" after taking a short break from the spotlight. The intense focus on Perot in June allowed Clinton to revive his image. Then, after Perot's departure in July, Clinton was able to steal back the mantle of change and thus win the election.

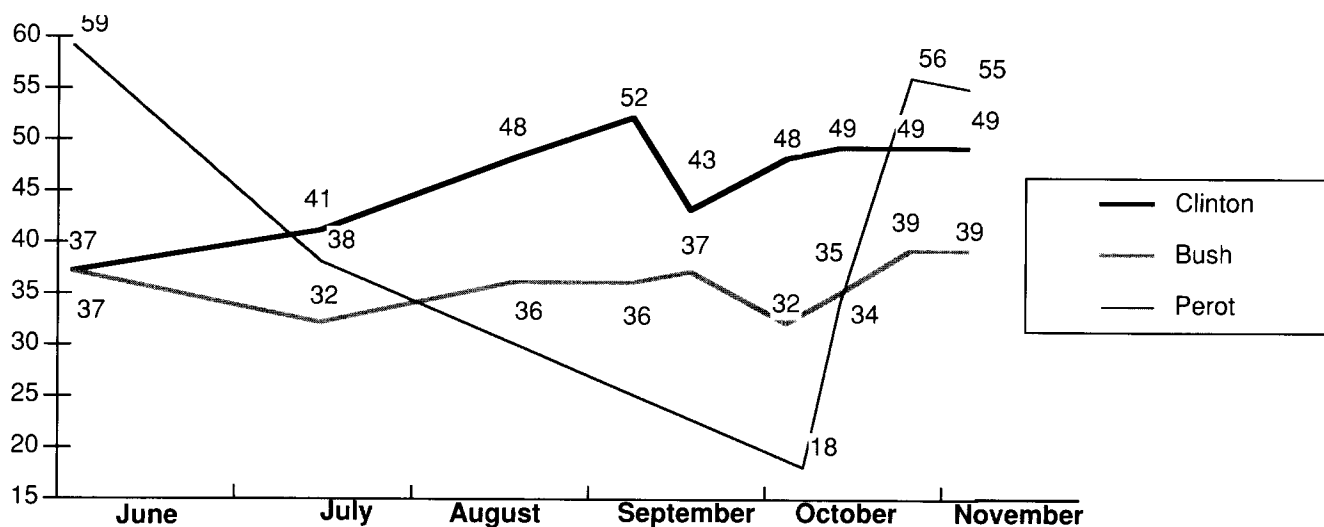
### Shifts in Perot's Standing

Perot got 19% of the vote in this election, but his impact was greater than even this substantial proportion suggests. At a critical point, Perot was able to keep the anti-incumbent discussion non-parti-

san in nature. The mood of the electorate could easily have turned anti-Republican, particularly over the long months when the Bush campaign had not yet gotten under way. Back in early June, the established party candidates were not well perceived. More voters (50%) had unfavorable views of both Bush and Clinton than favorable (40% for Clinton, 46% for Bush). Perot, on the other hand, was well received. Those more likely to be favorable toward him included college-educated men, persons from dual-career households, those aged 45-54, and ticket-splitters/independents.

Perot's candidacy was just getting off the ground in June. The conventional

**Figure 1**  
Clinton's, Bush's, and Perot's Favorable Ratings  
Among Ticket-Splitters/Independents



**Question cited in each figure:** Now we're going to mention some names of some people involved in politics. I'd like to have you tell me if you recognize the name and if so, do you have a favorable or unfavorable impression of that person? **Source for each figure:** The Tarrance Group, Battleground '92 Tracking Poll.

wisdom at the time was that the electorate simply did not know enough about him to make up their minds about the race. However tentative their views, a majority (53%) of voters in our poll expressed a favorable judgment of Perot, while just 19% were unfavorable. Only 27% said they didn't know enough about him or had no opinion of him.

Following Perot's decision during the Democratic Convention to drop out of the

### Bush's Standing Remained Stuck on the Negative Side

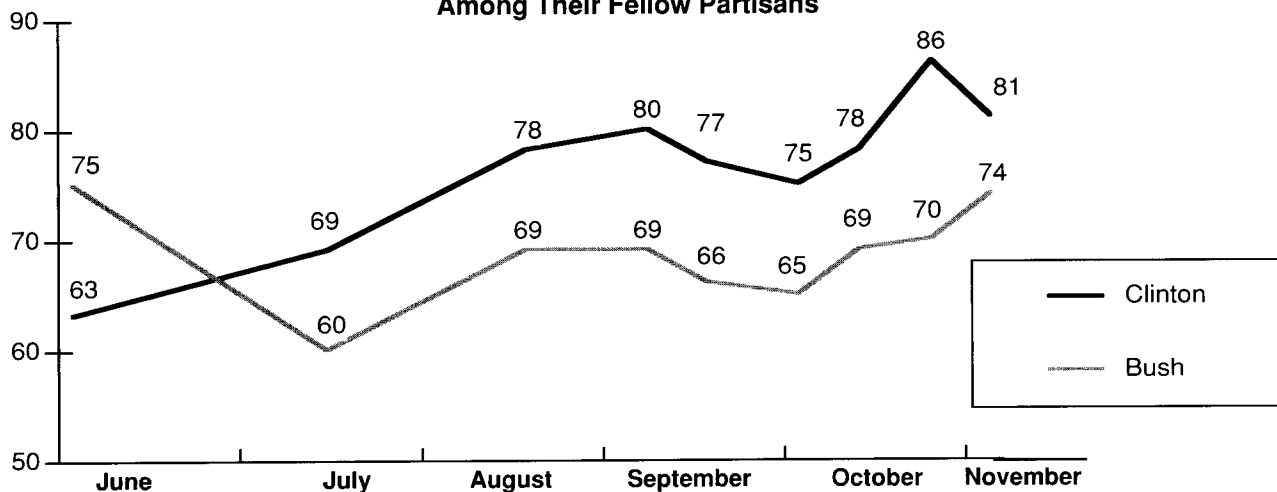
It seems incredible that a president so highly regarded in the wake of the Persian Gulf War just a year earlier could fall so quickly in the estimation of the voters. In June 1991, 79% of the electorate had a favorable impression of George Bush. By June 1992, however, a majority held unfavorable opinions. What happened in the interim was that the electorate came to

abandonment of his tax pledge seemed to have cost him dearly in a section of his party.

### Clinton Strengthened His Standing Among Democrats, but Struggled Among Independents

Clinton began his campaign for the White House with his favorable rating percentages lagging behind his unfavorables. Even among Democrats them-

**Figure 2**  
Clinton's and Bush's Favorable Ratings Among Their Fellow Partisans



race, however, sentiment toward him swung sharply negative. Unfavorable assessments grew throughout the remainder of the summer. By the beginning of October, two-thirds of voters expressed an unfavorable impression of Ross Perot. Negative assessments were almost universal across the populace.

Perot's recovery over the last month of the campaign, in terms of his popular standing, was quite striking. For example, he went from just 18% favorable among independents/ticket-splitters in our polling of October 4-7, to 55% favorable on October 30-November 1.<sup>1</sup> (See Figure 1.) In polling prior to the election, Perot had the best favorable-to-unfavorable ratio among independents, followed by Clinton, with Bush well back in third place.

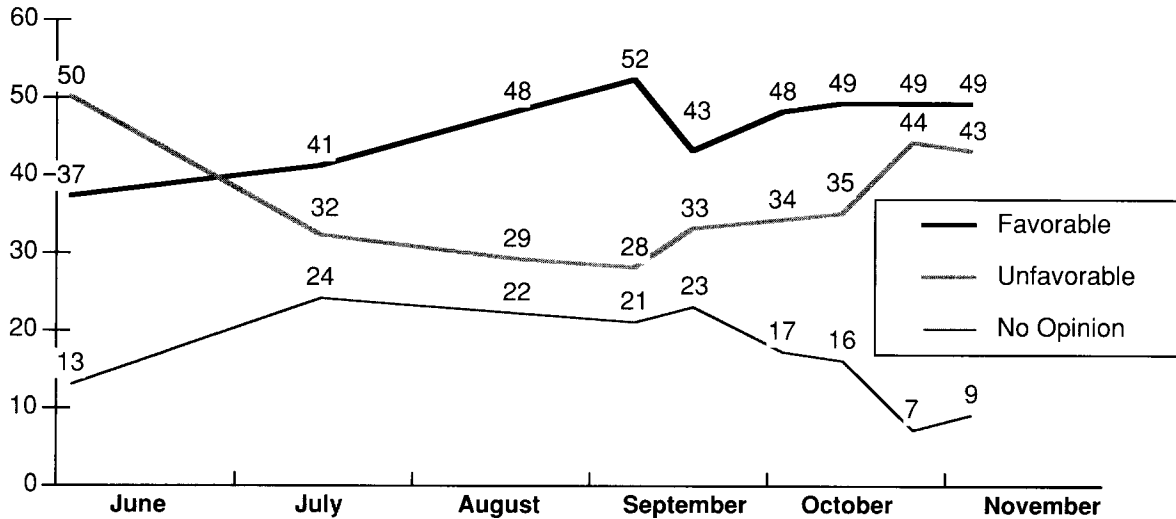
focus on the economy here at home. In the winter and spring of 1991, when the nation passed through the low point of the recession, its eyes were firmly fixed abroad. Then, in the latter part of 1991 and through much of 1992, when Bush was insisting that the nation was on its way toward recovery, voters themselves were focusing on economic troubles. Together with the 1990 budget deal with Congress, this shook confidence in him.

In the early June polling, 50% of the voters had an unfavorable opinion of Bush, and 46% a favorable impression. That distribution remained largely unaltered throughout the election. A comparison of favorability ratings among their respective partisans (Figure 2) reveals that Republicans were less supportive of Bush than Democrats were of Clinton. Bush's

selfes, 26% had an unfavorable opinion of him in early June. Democrats didn't move solidly behind Clinton in terms of his favorable ratings until the start of the Republican Convention.

In June 1992, Republicans had—as one would expect—a very unfavorable opinion of Bill Clinton. But, interestingly, his reputation among Republican partisans recovered sharply over the span of the party conventions, reaching its highpoint during the GOP Convention itself. Was this because Republican voters, too, were flirting with his message for a time? While Clinton's unfavorables among Republicans rose during the stretch-run of the campaign, they never reached the level they had been in the spring.

**Figure 3**  
**Clinton's Favorability Ratings Among**  
**Ticket-Splitters/Independents**



The key constituency for Bill Clinton, given his message of change, was the ticket-splitter/independent vote. As pointed out in note 1, these are voters who don't lean toward either party in terms of preferring a Republican or a Democrat in office. Note that Clinton's favorable-to-unfavorable ratio in this group reached its most advantageous level in early September (Figure 3). It then declined quite sharply, as those who had been sitting on the fence apparently moved into the unfavorable camp.

The fact that ticket-splitters/independents re-evaluated their estimates of

Clinton in the final days of the race can probably be traced to the actions of the Bush campaign. In the final few weeks, Bush hit his stride in terms of the comparison message—with regard to both questions of trust and the economic direction of the nation. This re-examination of Clinton by ticket-splitters/independents may be the factor most responsible for the tightening which occurred during the final weeks of the race.

**Endnotes**

<sup>1</sup> In each poll our respondents were asked: "Which of these statements best describes how you have usually voted in past elections

[rotate]: (1) mostly Republican; (2) a few more Republican than Democratic; (3) Independent/the Man; (4) a few more Democratic than Republican; (5) mostly Democratic." In this article, including the graphs, "ticket-splitters/independents" are those who chose the mid-point response—between one-sixth and one-seventh of the sample. "Republicans" are those who chose one or the other of the first two (as listed above) responses, "Democrats" categories 4 or 5. Note that this classification yields relatively more Democrats and Republicans, and fewer independents, than the conventional party ID question. We think it is a better measure, though, of actual partisan inclinations.

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