NAFTA REVISITED:

MOST AMERICANS JUST WEREN'T DEEPLY ENGAGED

By Neil S. Newhouse and Christine L. Matthews

In mid-November, the Washington papers featured headlines once again outing President Clinton's come-from-behind success in advancing his agenda in Congress. This time it was with NAFTA. As with the summer's budget vote, the President's forces helped to secure its passage in the last days, amid much indecision and drama in the nation's capital.

Unlike the vote on the budget, however, the American public was not actively engaged in the NAFTA debate. In the months leading up to the vote, labor and business interests alike worked hard to portray the debate as one centering on America's future. The public did not, though, invest themselves in the outcome. As late as August, nearly six in ten on a CNN/USA Today poll said they were not following the NAFTA story.

The President was tardy entering the dialogue on NAFTA and, in fact, many were surprised to learn that Clinton supported the treaty, considering labor opposition. Relatively late in the game the American public still knew little about NAFTA. Working to fill the information vacuum was Ross Perot with his now famous "giant sucking sound" comments, to prey on fears of job loss; labor interests focused on the same themes. In the absence of a counter-message, the focus with regard to NAFTA came to be American job loss.

Ross Perot, Pat Buchanan and other "anti-establishment" pseudo-populist figures had discovered that NAFTA could be used as the perfect metaphor to capitalize on an "America First" theme that actually does resonate with a large segment of the population. By using NAFTA to highlight a multi-dimensional "us against them" theme (big business versus the average worker; America versus the rest of the world), they attempted to create a sense of urgency and investment in the NAFTA decision. Initially they were successful; but culminating with the Larry King exchange between Perot and Al Gore, the general public began to suspect that Perot, especially, was using this issue for his own political advancement. In fact, at the conclusion of the Perot-Gore debate, 56% said that Perot's opposition to NAFTA was based on his own personal political interests, while only 31% said he was motivated by the good of the country.

A Late Start

Those opposed to NAFTA clearly had gotten a jump on the pro-NAFTA

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**Figure 1**

**Flip-Flop: Partisan Rank-and-File Stances on NAFTA, Early and Late**

**Question:** Do you favor or oppose the proposed free trade agreement between the United States and Mexico?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Early (9/10-12/93)</th>
<th>Late (11/19-21/93)</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Favor</td>
<td>Oppose</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rep.</td>
<td>40%</td>
<td>37%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dem.</td>
<td>32%</td>
<td>40%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ind.</td>
<td>45%</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

**Source:** Survey by the Gallup Organization for CNN/USA Today, latest that of November 19-21, 1993.
forces. Once the President began to make a visible, high profile case for NAFTA, the debate became a battle of personali-
ties. Not since the 1992 campaign had the public seen Perot take such a heated position. The high mark for the Clinton ad-
ministration was the Vice President’s perform-
ance on the Larry King show in early
November. The public and the pundits
gave the “win” to Gore. Perot’s rhetoric
had grown a little stale and his nasty tone
and posturing didn’t play well. How-
ever, in the battle of personalities, the
debate on the merits of NAFTA took a
backseat.

At the start of the debate few people
really had an opinion on NAFTA. In a
Public Opinion Strategies national sur-
vey in February, support for NAFTA
was at 19%, opposition at 16%. And
even this opinion was shallow. Just
19% took a strong position on the issue
one way or another. Fully two-thirds
said they did not have enough informa-
tion on NAFTA to form an opinion
about it.

A few months later, when our firm
conducted focus groups across the
country on the issue, we found that
specific awareness of NAFTA was vir-
tually non-existent. Even after a lengthy
discussion, most participants did not
see how NAFTA affected them in a
personal way.

In May, a CNN/Time survey
showed a ten-point plurality opposed
(34% favor—43% oppose). In June,
opinion was virtually unchanged (35%
favor—46% oppose). A review of survey
data reveals that neither side was able to
claim a majority of public opinion and, for
most people, there was little depth of
feeling on this issue. However, those who
did feel strongly about the issue were
opposed to the treaty.

Late Mobilization

By fall, the pro-NAFTA folks finally
realized they were not leading the debate
and turned up the heat. While their mes-
sengers essentially became their message
Following the Gore/Perot debate, the
profile of the average NAFTA supporter
began to change from a typical GOP pro-
file to one decidedly more Democratic.
With President Clinton leading the way,
the Democratic rank-and-file moved to-
ward at least nominal support of NAFTA,
while Republicans, seeing the Clinton lead,
moved away. In the end, both parties’
congressional members were at odds with
their rank-and-file supporters.

What’s most important, public opin-
ion on this issue was weak and con-
flicted, and neither side gained a clear
advantage. The public wasn’t tuned
into this issue.

■ Americans were uncertain whether
this was a foreign affairs issue, a
domestic jobs issue, or just a political hot
potato.

■ Ross Perot’s entry into this debate
may have initially helped the anti-
NAFTA cause, but probably ended up
hurting it. Voters who distrusted him
tended to support NAFTA.

■ Americans never became polarized
on this issue. The public never sensed
it had a big stake in the debate. We see
this in the finding that almost 4 in 5
had no idea whether their own con-
gressman was for or against the treaty.

Some Americans felt strongly about
NAFTA. But the vast majority nei-
ther understood it nor cared enough
about it to become well informed. As
a result, public opinion was effectively
neutralized on the issue and had little
impact on the final outcome.

![Figure 2](image)

**Figure 2**

**Sitting It Out: Low Political Awareness of NAFTA**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Against</th>
<th>For</th>
<th>Unsure/DK</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>7%</td>
<td>14%</td>
<td>79%</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

**Question:** Next week...the House of Repre-
sentatives will vote on NAFTA....As far as
you know, is your representative in Con-
geress in favor of NAFTA, or opposed to
NAFTA, or aren’t you sure where he or she
stands?

**Source:** Survey by CBS News/New York Times,
November 11-14, 1993.

(note the support from Bush, Carter, and
Ford), the tide began to slowly turn. A
CNN/Time national survey in September
showed opinion on NAFTA evenly di-
vided (41% favor—42% oppose).

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