

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 touting 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

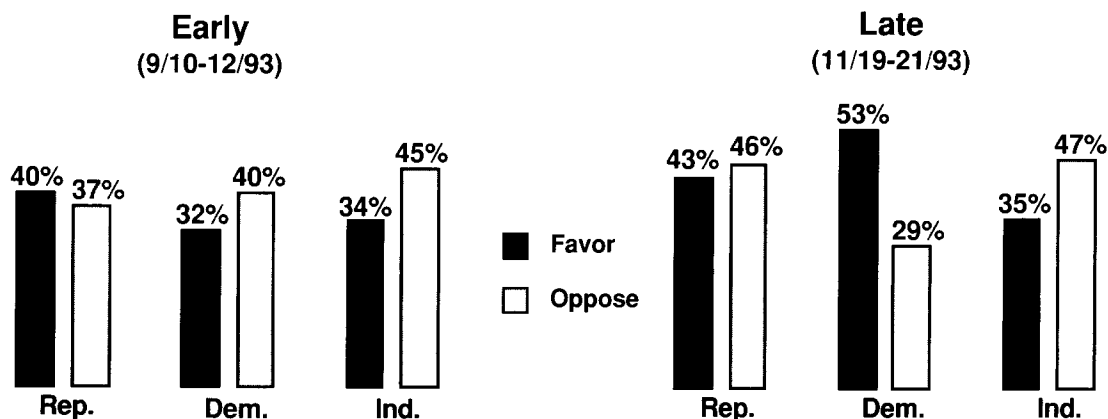
to highlight a multi-dimensional "us against them" theme (big business versus the average worker; America versus the rest of the world), they attempted to create a sense of urgency and investment in the NAFTA decision. Initially they were successful; but culminating with the Larry King exchange between 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

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?



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 personalities. Not since the 1992 campaign had the public seen Perot take such a heated position. The high mark for the Clinton administration was the Vice President's performance 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. However, 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 survey 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 information 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 virtually 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 messengers essentially became their message

Following the Gore/Perot debate, the profile of the average NAFTA supporter began to change from a typical GOP profile to one decidedly more Democratic. With President Clinton leading the way, the Democratic rank-and-file moved toward 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 opinion on this issue was weak and conflicted, and neither side gained a clear advantage. The public wasn't tuned into this issue.

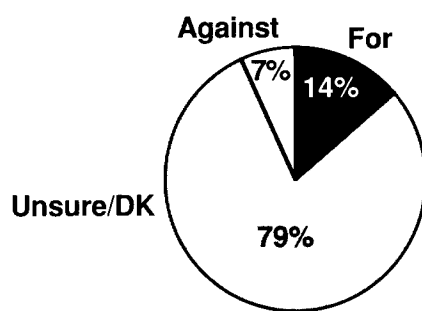
- Americans were uncertain whether this was a foreign affairs issue, a domestic jobs issue, or just a political hot potato.

- 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 congressman was for or against the treaty.

Some Americans felt strongly about NAFTA. But the vast majority neither 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
Sitting It Out: Low Political Awareness of NAFTA



Question: Next week...the House of Representatives will vote on NAFTA....As far as you know, **is your representative in Congress 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 divided (41% favor—42% oppose).

*Neil S. Newhouse is partner, and
Christine L. Matthews is vice
president, Public Opinion
Strategies*