

**THE BUSHPOP THING:
GETTING THE JOB APPROVAL NUMBERS IN
PERSPECTIVE**

By W. Wayne Shannon

For some fifty years now, since George Gallup began to take regular readings of presidential job approval, standing in the polls has been a standard measurement of presidential performance. Once technology had made it possible, it was inevitable that the press and the public would want to know "how he is doing"—in effect, to keep score on the central player in the great American game of politics.

Not only is standing in the polls our most tangible measure of presidents' performance; it is an active element of their power situation in Washington. As Richard Neustadt pointed out many years ago, members of Congress, congressional staffs, bureaucrats, top executive branch political appointees, interest groups and the press, all constantly monitor the president's "public prestige" and compare it with their own insiders' estimate of how he is doing. The president is not like a British prime minister—who can be quite unpopular at the moment and still enjoy near-absolute control of Westminster (exactly the case with Mrs. Thatcher now). He needs both popular approval and the respect (even the fear) of the Washingtonians if he is to leave his mark on a recalcitrant governance community characterized by separated powers and weak, undisciplined political parties.

All modern presidents have understood this. Lyndon Johnson was famous for brandishing the latest *favorable* polls in the face of friend and foe alike. Ronald Reagan put his own unique stylistic twist on the subject when in 1982 he greeted Richard Wirthlin's bad news on his sagging job approval ratings with the one-liner: "Well, I could always get shot again" (a reference to the upward blip in his job approval ratings after the attempt on his life in the Spring of 1981). George Bush knows he is riding high in the polls, and this seems to have contributed to his overall self-confidence. Bush's Gallup general job approval rating after eleven months in office is higher than that of any president since John F. Kennedy (See this issue's Public Opinion Report.) This is not lost on the Washington community.

Lest we make too much of them, it is important that we get the Bush job approval numbers in

perspective. The Gallup question permits extensive historical comparison, since it has been asked in exactly the same way since 1938. We must use extreme caution in interpreting survey responses over such a long period in which many things about American politics have changed. Still, there is much to be learned by comparing the last ten presidents' approval ratings. The accompanying table shows annual Gallup job approval from 1938 through 1989. By looking across the rows of the table we can see each president's job rating from his first to last year in office. By looking up and down we can see how his record compares with that of others at the same point in the presidential term cycle.

If they are interpreted correctly, these numbers have a lot to say. As the first column of the table shows for everyone since Roosevelt (who had no Gallup ratings before 1938), presidents generally do well with the public in their first year. Every president has done better in his first year than his average over all years in office. In Truman's case, the fall from grace is especially striking—from 87% in 1945 to 30% in 1952. Truman's championship first-year ratings have a lot in common with Bush's high ratings since May. (Bush's approval stood at 71% in the December 1989 Gallup survey.) Truman had not produced the great national triumph of the war's end, any more than Bush has brought about the dissolution of the Soviet empire and the current strong performance of the American economy that now boost his public approval.

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Looking across each row of the table, we see that there is nothing like a standard pattern of presidential popularity; every case is different. Roosevelt did not achieve his highest ratings before the coming of the war. Ike and JFK hold fairly steady across their terms.

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GALLUP PRESIDENTIAL APPROVAL RATINGS:
 YEARLY AVERAGE FOR ALL PRESIDENTS, FDR TO GEORGE BUSH
 BY YEAR IN OFFICE

		ROOSEVELT								
Year in office	1938	1939	1940	1941	1942	1943	1944	1945		
% approval	57%	59	64	73	77	72	—	—	(67% Avg.)	
		TRUMAN								
Year in office	1945	1946	1947	1948	1949	1950	1951	1952		
% approval	81%	45	55	38	59	41	28	30	(47% Avg.)	
		EISENHOWER								
Year in office	1953	1954	1955	1956	1957	1958	1959	1960		
% approval	69%	65	71	73	65	55	63	61	(65% Avg.)	
		KENNEDY								
Year in office	1961	1962	1963							
% approval	76%	72	64							(71% Avg.)
		JOHNSON								
Year in office	1963	1964	1965	1966	1967	1968				
% approval	76%	75	66	51	44	43				(59% Avg.)
		NIXON								
Year in office	1969	1970	1971	1972	1973	1974				
% approval	61%	57	50	57	43	24				(49% Avg.)
		FORD								
Year in office	1974	1975	1976							
% approval	54%	43	48							(48% Avg.)
		CARTER								
Year in office	1977	1978	1979	1980						
% approval	62%	46	38	39						(46% Avg.)
		REAGAN								
Year in office	1981	1982	1983	1984	1985	1986	1987	1988		
% approval	58%	44	45	55	60	62	51	52	(53% Avg.)	
		BUSH								
Year in office	1989*									
% approval	64%									

*Average of 13 surveys through December 1989.

president, Reagan remained low at the end of his first year. Yet, by 1986 he was riding high in the polls at about 65% before Iran-contra brought him back to the low 50s.

What these data tell us when they are put in proper perspective is that the Gallup question measures what the public takes to be presidential performance. The modern president is expected to do many things—among them, symbolize the nation, accomplish national purposes abroad, formulate domestic policies, maintain prosperity, lead his party, and, perhaps most of all, articulate a certain vision of where the nation needs to go at the time. The Gallup ratings measure the public's sense of success or failure in carrying out these difficult role expectations. Presidential job approval is mainly what social scientists call a dependent variable. The presidents in the table whose ratings fall into the lower depths are there because the public has thought that one or more of the really important things—the economy, foreign/military policy, or general standards of governmental decency and comity—had gone amiss on their watch. The presidency is not a popularity contest. We have made too much of presidential popularity as an independent variable. Yes, success breeds success, but approval ratings are based on performance. There is no way that presidents can hoist themselves up if things are not perceived to be going well.

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Above all else we need to see that the job approval numbers are only part of a really successful presidency. Roosevelt and Reagan tell us that this is so. Their exceptional vision, legislative leadership and impact on the polity—their agenda-setting ability—are not apparent in the job approval numbers alone. Strong presidents as formulators of ideas and programs generate intense partisanship. That is why the rich went to the Trans-Lux to hiss Roosevelt in the famous *New Yorker* cartoon and why Reagan's job approval was unusually low among the less fortunate, blacks and women. Real leadership divides, and it pulls the job

approval numbers down. This is only one of many paradoxes surrounding the presidency—a unique office in a unique polity.

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George Bush is now much more popular than Ronald Reagan at the same moment in his term. Yet, I would argue, his impressive public standing is mainly the product of his predecessor's success. Reagan more than any president in memory understood that the presidency is our only national institution capable of generating leadership and direction. Bush would do well to understand this. Reagan amply demonstrated that the presidency can work. After so much failure we had begun to doubt it. Now, it is Mr. Bush's turn.

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"BUILD A BETTER MOUSETRAP, AND..."

Here is a list of some different products. Would you read down that list and call off those that you own?

Percentage who own a Microwave Oven

1977	6%
1979	9
1981	19
1983	24
1985	37
1987	59
1989	75

NOTE: Surveys by the Roper Organization. Question wording varied slightly over the years.