

# THE PUBLIC PERSPECTIVE

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### AMERICAN POLITICS AND CAMPAIGN '90: INTERVIEW WITH RICHARD B. WIRTHLIN

**Public Perspective:** Obviously it's still early to say, but is the conflict with Iraq likely to shift the focus of public concern in this year's elections?

**Richard B. Wirthlin:** It depends on where we go from here. The first stage of a foreign crisis is always the most predictable. The public and leaders in Congress rally around the president and applaud him for the action he has taken. Following the norm, George Bush's job rating rose sharply in the first two weeks following Iraq's invasion of Kuwait. The second stage begins when people start evaluating the military move in a more hard-headed fashion and ask: "What are the driving components of the crisis?," "Is there a villain?," "Is our vital interest really at stake here?," "Was it judicious to send in military forces?" So far, I would say that if now you wanted to paint a villain on the world stage, you couldn't do much better than the profile of Saddam Hussein. He clearly wears a black hat. Also, there is a lot of support for our action in the international community. This strengthens the perception that intervention was a wise decision. The third stage comes when the costs — human costs, our world prestige, financial costs — are tallied.

My own guess is that the Iraqi conflict may take six months before we are even through the second stage, let alone the third. So, while the conflict may change the issue agenda, it's going to be some time before we see any clear partisan political implications of this change.

**PP:** Let's talk about the issue agenda this year. What, besides Iraq, is on people's minds?

**RBW:** We completed a study July 25 — remember, this was a week before the Iraqi invasion — and asked respondents what they would say is the single most important problem facing the United States today, the one that personally concerns them most. Twenty-eight percent said drugs or crime. A little more than half (51%) mentioned some kind of social issue, including environmental pollution (8%). Abortion issues were mentioned by fewer than 2%. Poverty and hunger were cited by 5%; Social

Security, education and health care costs by around 2% each. The biggest concern in the pocketbook cluster — which was cited by about a quarter of all respondents — is the federal deficit (12%). The latter suggests that this issue, and how gracefully the Republicans and Democrats go through their dance of compromise, could well hurt some and help others. Pre-Iraq concern about foreign policy was close to being off the scope; only 4% mentioned any of the 12 to 13 foreign affairs issues we consistently track....

The agenda itself would suggest, then, that there are probably really fewer big issues driving the election this fall than in any election we've seen in the last 15 or 20 years. Hence, how candidates handle "boutique" issues — which provide a point of distinction, being specifically crafted either to highlight an opponent's weakness or

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##### POLITICS 1990

The Wirthlin interview leads off a comprehensive review. Geoff Garin discusses the burden of incumbency. James Barnes examines races around the country and argues that local candidates -- not some big overriding issue -- are proving decisive. Dotty Lynch describes abortion politics, post-Webster. A Public Opinion Report explores the President's standing.

##### THE AMERICAN WORKER

A special Public Opinion Report looks at the American worker: status; job satisfactions and dissatisfactions; expectations; special needs in the age of the "post-marital family"; skills and training. What's happening to employee loyalty to company? What workforce changes will most affect American business?

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emphasize one's own strength — is going to be very important. In this context, you would have to look at two or three things that could be fairly widely used. One is the S & L issue. Americans generally are now very cynical; the proportion expressing political cynicism has not reached the high levels of the late 1970s, but it is rising substantially. The greed and corruption evident in the savings and loan fiasco compounds the public's already high concern about what it is that government really does....

I have always liked the Roper question: "Generally speaking, would you say that things in the country are going in the right direction, or have they pretty seriously gotten off on the wrong track?" Fifty-eight percent of those whom we interviewed in late July said the country has seriously gotten off on the wrong track. That proportion has moved up substantially over the last four or five months. We then asked the follow up question: *Why* [for those who came down on this side] do you think the country has gotten off on the wrong track? As you would expect, drugs and crime came out at the top of the list; 33% mentioned them. Twenty-nine percent cited economic concerns: jobs (6%), inflation (8%), high taxes (6%), and the budget deficit (5%). A third cluster, mentioned by 28% of those who said the country is off on the wrong track, involves issues of governance and the quality of leadership. If you look at the verbatim responses — this was asked in an open-ended way — the tone is a very angry one. One North Carolina man was fairly typical when he said, "Those people in Congress are just waiting around until the lights go out so that they can steal everything that isn't nailed to the floor."

This could, then, be a year when incumbents, who on the savings and loan matter or some other practice are well within the law but may be seen as having cut a corner or two, could be in trouble. Only five incumbents lost in 1988, and four of them had been indicted or convicted. The list of defeated incumbents could be a lot longer and broader this year.

**PP:** A solid majority now say the US is off on the wrong track. Numbers like that are often cited in the press as spelling trouble for the party controlling the presidency, on the grounds it is more likely to be blamed. Is this the case at present? Is the rising "wrong track" proportion bad news for the GOP?

**RBW:** It is difficult to say that it is either favorable or unfavorable. If you look at the difference between the "right direction" proportion and the president's job rating, these two numbers have tracked much more closely in the past than they have since Bush was elected. The gap has typically been much narrower than it is now. Today, few say the country is going in the right direction, but

many credit the president with doing a good job. This could be interpreted in two different ways. It could be said that for whatever reason Bush is above judgment in terms of the things that are worrying people and that this shows his strength. But it might also be interpreted as a potential source of weakness — because his popularity has stretched so far beyond a normal, solid base.

This aside, the 58% saying "wrong track" does suggest a state of mind that is a yellow flag of caution for incumbents. If the proportion continues to rise as in the late 70s, it could be a forerunner of a difficult time for incumbents who might not normally have been considered vulnerable. If you look at how the responses break by party, Republicans think the country is going in the right direction, but only very narrowly, 48% - 44%. On the other hand, Democrats are very pessimistic — 24% say "right direction" and 69% say "wrong track." If you took those two sets of numbers, you would say that it isn't necessarily bad for the Republicans, but I am not willing to jump to that conclusion. I think it's a blade that could cut either for or against the Republican party.

**PP:** Turning to other issues, how has the president's shift on taxes affected this year's campaigns?

**RBW:** Taxes clearly are one of the things that voters look for to differentiate one candidate from another. Many Republicans began their campaigns earlier this year on the belief that "no new taxes" would work to their advantage. That advantage has been softened if not eliminated. The question is: Will Bush be able to get something in return politically that is strong enough to override the concerns of Americans that he walked away from a prior commitment?

**PP:** What is the political impact of the S & L mess?

**RBW:** This is very tricky. On the one hand, the issue has tremendous potential, because voter unease over the way things have been handled is so high. On the other hand, partisan blame is widely and evenly distributed. Overall the issue does provide some opportunity for the Democrats — especially when the case can be made that a Republican incumbent had a responsibility of some sort in the debacle, or that his past campaigns were supported by contributions from the savings and loan industry.

**PP:** On the economy in broad terms, as we sometimes say, "if the election were held today," given the economy as it is today, would this issue help the one party or the other?

**RBW:** The status of the economy right now would not really work to one party's advantage. Of course, if the economy should suddenly go into a nosedive, that, more than anything I can think of, would help the Democrats.

**PP:** In 1989 there was a lot of discussion about the impact of the abortion issue. Now it's 13 months after the *Webster* decision. What is your sense of the issue's partisan impact? Is one party being helped and the other hurt?

**RBW:** Several things suggest that the abortion issue may well make a difference in several races in 1990 — especially set against the background of an agenda that does not cut deeply or clearly in partisan terms. The conventional wisdom of 1989 was that to be pro-life was to put your political career in jeopardy. I believe this is wrong. In 1989 in New Jersey and Virginia it was not the candidate's position on the issue, but how and when it was taken and then whether he was able or not to mobilize those who believe strongly in the side he was espousing, that was decisive. Pro-life candidates in these two 1989 races waffled. It was their downfall. Now, there's no question that *Webster* activated a group of individuals who previously didn't have a lot of interest in politics, most of whom were for abortion. On the other hand, it is still true the intensity element favors the pro-life side — in that more pro-life people than pro-choice people say the issue would ultimately determine their vote in a race where the candidates take opposite sides. I strongly believe that the rush to judgment that pro-life was not the political place to be at the end of 1989 is not going to be sustained at the end of 1990. Either we are going to have a very mixed picture, or the pendulum could swing back politically to the pro-life position.

**PP:** Is there any sense that the abortion debate has led high status young people to swing against the Republicans?

**RBW:** We get an interesting trade off here. On the one hand younger, affluent, better educated Republicans are those most discomforted by the pro-life position. On the other hand, on the Democratic side, it's the minorities -- blacks and Hispanics -- and blue-collar workers, who are the most unhappy with the pro-abortion stand. In some cases their feelings on the issue are strong enough to pull them to the Republican side of the ledger. In many cases the impact leads them not to vote at all. One "case study" story with regard to the abortion issue and minorities: I have been told that six years ago in his run for re-election, Jesse Helms received a higher percentage of the black vote than any Republican senator running that year, and that Helms' strong pro-life, pro-family position was key to this result. These data are not from one of my studies, so I can't confirm them, but I can say that they are entirely consistent with the data we are getting.

On the other hand, the pro-abortion groups are becoming increasingly sophisticated in their techniques for mobilizing their voters. In particular, the National Abortion Rights Action League, the National Organization for

Women, and Planned Parenthood are now working closely together and dividing the total political effort effectively....So, when you add it all up, the abortion issue will cut both ways politically this fall.

**PP:** What do your data show happening to party strength over the past year?

**RBW:** Republican and Democratic party identification has been very stable. Our latest numbers show 40% Republican identifiers, 43% Democrats, and 17% Independents. The Republicans continue to do very well among younger voters. Among those 18-24, they have a 24 point edge — 54% to 30%. There is a Democratic "bubble" in the 35-44 age group — which is consistent with the classic political science analysis of generational effects. These people were politicized during the 1960s and 1970s, when the Vietnam war protests were dominating US politics. The next oldest group — those 45-65 — is again more Republican. But those over 65, who came of age during the Great Depression, are the Democrats' best age group. So the political experiences of one's formative years exert a strong continuing impact....With regard to blacks, Republicans have not made significant headway: Only 12% identify with the Republican party....

One of the things that is going to impact whether the Republicans come through this election well or poorly is how they can adjust to a changed role. In the past, Republicans always hoped for limited turnout because our slice of the electorate voted more consistently than the Democrats'. Now these tables have been completely turned. Because we have expanded our base, it has become much more diverse, much less strong, and considerably less likely to go to the polls. Also, a good part of our gain has come from both the younger and the less educated — groups much less likely to go to the polls.

...Overall, the rolling realignment of the 1980s has stabilized. The good news for Republicans is that their party isn't sliding back to the big deficit in party identification they faced throughout the 1970s and indeed for most election cycles after 1937. The bad news is that the Republicans really haven't been able to institutionalize the realignment. And the prospects for doing so in 1992 are dim. In my view a realignment becomes a permanent fixture on the political landscape only when the party has sufficient power to draw ahead in legislative contests so it can control re-districting, as well as control the White House. I just don't see that happening in the near future.

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