

THE PUBLIC PERSPECTIVE

A Roper Center Review of Public Opinion and Polling

VOLUME 2, NUMBER 4

MAY/JUNE 1991

THE PARTIES, LOOKING TO 1992

The Republicans

PRESCRIPTION FOR THE GOP

By Edward J. Rollins

To appreciate the outlook for Republicans in 1992, let's begin by correcting some notable misperceptions about how the Grand Old Party fared last year. Before President Bush's midterm, there had been twenty-two midterm elections this century: Twelve occurred with Republicans holding the White House, ten amidst Democratic presidencies.

Holding Ground in Adversity

In the Republican midterms, the GOP lost a total of 361 House seats—an average of 30 per election. Senate losses have averaged 4.7; 1986, when the party lost eight senators, pushed the average up a bit. Governorship losses have averaged 4.5. The GOP gained governors in only two of its midterms since 1900. Against this historical experience, Republicans lost in 1990 just nine House seats net, one in the Senate and one governorship. And the party managed this despite a national political environment in which the President's approval rating plummeted only a month before Election Day as a result of the budget debacle. To be sure, Republicans began with a lower base than usual and therefore had fewer seats to lose. But without the budget mess and the President's switch on taxes, the party was poised to make off-year gains, something rare indeed.

Some Republican losses in 1990 came in states important both presidentially and in terms of reapportionment. But here too, the GOP's woes have been greatly

The Democrats

WHERE WE STAND

By Leslie C. Francis

The 1992 elections will present extraordinary challenges for both political parties. It's reasonable to expect 100 or more fully competitive House races and tough battles for Senate seats held by members of the 1980 and 1986 classes. Moreover, 12 governorships and thousands of state legislative races will be contested amidst a presidential election, an unpredictable factor for those now mapping local or state strategies.

The New Competitiveness

It's likely that 1992 will produce more competitive contests than any set of elections in the last two decades—which is fitting, because this is a bigger election with higher stakes than any since 1972, the last time presidential balloting occurred immediately after a census and reapportionment. And, given the problems and opportunities facing the nation, the stakes are very high indeed.

In virtually every region of the country, involving some newer members but also some veterans, some Democrats and some Republicans—congressional candidates will find themselves in hard-fought campaigns. This competitiveness is caused by several factors, including a redistricting process which will result in many districts gaining or losing at least 50,000 voters. More importantly, for a variety of reasons, 50 incumbents in 1990 saw their reelection margins reduced by at least 10 percentage points. Eighty-five incumbents winning reelection did so with under 60% of the total vote.

IN THIS ISSUE

Politics in the US: Contending views on the parties' standing, and a comprehensive review of poll data on the national political pulse. **Politics in Canada:** The fractured political scene, with renewed argument over the future of the federation. **Politics in Puerto Rico:** The perennial absorption with the "status" issue, and the conflicting claims of culture and economics.

exaggerated. Democrats gained the governor's mansion in Florida and Texas, but lost Ohio and Michigan. They now control states with a total of 294 electoral votes—down eight from what they had before last November's balloting. The GOP emerged from the 1990 elections significantly stronger than it had any right to expect.

A Presidency Transformed

A swift and relatively bloodless Gulf War victory—coupled with Democratic bungling in the vote authorizing the President to use force—pulled Bush's approval ratings out of their domestically-driven slump of last October to record highs. While the approval ratings were bound to decline from their post-war peaks, the President's handling of the crisis has added a dimension to his political persona which will not easily be diminished in the voters' minds. The American public now sees him as a leader willing to make tough decisions. Looking at his performance in the six months of Desert Shield and Desert Storm, it's hard to believe that this is the same George Bush whom some derided for the "wimp factor" in 1988, and who had to get tough with CBS anchorman Dan Rather to demonstrate his resolve to skeptical voters.

President Bush has crossed a political Rubicon, the kind many candidates dream of but never reach. His presidential mettle is now established. The question of his ability to lead in a crisis is settled. Once the voters see these qualities in an incumbent president, only the gravest crisis can derail his reelection.

Carefully-crafted television spots, mirroring the imagery we saw in CBS's recent prime-time homecoming extravaganza for the troops (produced, not so coincidentally, by Roger Ailes), may evoke nostalgic yearning for the unity we all experienced during the war. But to try to sustain war euphoria is to miss the point of the political benefits Bush gets from his mastery of this crisis: He no longer has to prove himself to the electorate. For the Democrats, the burden of convincing voters to switch to the challenger has become unbearably heavy. Assuming peace, the end to the recession, and Bush's continuing good health, the 1992 presidential election is *a fait accompli*. This doesn't mean, though, that the best thing the GOP can do now is to wait as close to November as possible wrapped in the tranquility of the Rose Garden.

Out of the Rose Garden, Into the Arena

Two factors argue for an early, vigorous, and sustained presidential campaign. The first is the relative strength the GOP enjoys after a midterm which ought to have left it weaker. That foundation should be built upon now, using the presidential campaign as a tool. President Bush is at the probable peak in popularity he will enjoy

We Democrats view this climate as a challenge—not the nightmare that many pundits have predicted. The mood is up-beat because the party's position is strong on the issues Americans care most about. While Newt Gingrich and Phil Gramm tramp across the country eagerly describing negative ads attacking Democrats who voted in January for continued sanctions against Iraq, and GOP operatives gloat over George Bush's temporarily high poll ratings, Democrats are looking at other issues and more important numbers: a 6.8% unemployment rate; a \$300 billion plus dollar deficit; increases in family disintegration, school dropout rates, health costs, violent crime, and other alarming domestic trends.

Economic Protest

Growing disenchantment with the economic status quo is evident in almost every segment of American society. The broad working class feels especially hard-pressed and totally by-passed in the boom of the 1980s. As Kevin Phillips has pointed out [*The Politics of Rich and Poor*, Random House, 1990], growth in real wealth and income during the 1980s was concentrated among the top 1% of Americans; that narrow slice of the populace saw its share of the national income rise sharply over the decade. As a result of the general public's reaction to this, Phillips has said, "Republican domination of the White House is pretty well played out." He also cites other factors which are causing a breakdown in basic tenets of Republicanism, from the collapse of the Soviet Union, to the savings and loan scandal and bailout, to the fact that the "Religious Right is losing its edge on social issues."

Retrospective analyses of the Reagan presidency have shown graphically that "Reaganomics" was a sham. George Bush was right in 1980 when he called the whole thing "voodoo economics." But, because he played the role of head cheerleader for the scheme from 1981 to 1989, he cannot escape responsibility for its disastrous aftermath. Voters are clearly ready to hold Bush and his accomplices accountable for the current "state of the union." A cross-section of Americans were asked by the Gallup Organization in March, after the end of the war in the Gulf, whether they approved or disapproved of the president's handling of various domestic issues:

	Approve	Disapprove
Poverty and homelessness	27%	65%
Savings & loan crisis	28	56
Availability of health care	34	57
The economy	37	56

These numbers are not aberrations. Similar measurements from November 1989, July 1990, and October 1990 show that the president has been consistently rated low by voters on a host of domestic issues.

during his two terms. Popular presidents raise funds, draw crowds, and energize party workers. The grassroots of the GOP are most in need of cultivating, and the president ought to use his reelection as a reason to go out early and raise money for Republican state parties.

My second reason for advocating a prolonged campaign season answers the objection a politically-astute reader might have—why risk the high presidential approval by descending to the level of a partisan candidate? The answer is that coming out of the Rose Garden early poses no real risk. This is not 1984, when President Reagan began his reelection drive after polarizing tax and budget battles with Congress, a steep recession with double-digit unemployment, and a host of very credible challengers clamoring to unseat him. Head-to-head polls in 1983 showed Walter Mondale and John Glenn giving the President a run for his money in '84, and Gary Hart's surge in the early primaries sent shock waves rippling through our campaign headquarters in Washington.

By contrast, even the much-vaunted Mario Cuomo barely breaks into double-digits in a poll pairing with George Bush. With leads ranging from forty to sixty percent over even credible Democratic challengers (and it is an irony of 1992 that the more credible a Democratic challenger is, the less likely he is to actually enter the race), Bush has nothing to fear from abandoning a Rose Garden strategy and giving the voters a little excitement.

The only risk to the GOP comes from a delayed entry into the political arena. If voters, including base Republicans, decide that 1992 is a foregone conclusion, many will stay home. Because the increased GOP turnout is of substantial benefit down the ticket in a presidential year, it's critically important to excite the rank-and-file. Given the likely depressed state of straight-ticket Democratic voting, there's a real possibility a strong President-inspired Republican turnout would pull in victories for House and Senate candidates next year who would get only 45-49% of the vote in an off-year.

Accentuate the Partisan Differences

A political platform is a good place to start an aggressive campaign. In 1980, the GOP platform featured declarations of principles written in political poetry. Tax cuts were advocated not because of some macro-economic objective like growth, but because it's a citizen's right to keep what he or she earns, not government's right to take what it wants. In contrast, the 1988 platform was written in the language of technocrats eager to defend the eight-year record of government programs under the GOP. To be sure, our platform was not bad compared to the Democrats', who offered only a vague "statement of principles" out of fear of alienating middle-of-the-road

President Bush gets high marks, as he should, for his performance in the heat of the Persian Gulf conflict. However, the Administration's failure to recognize the critical foreign policy events that led to the war will be debated vigorously. And voters will continue to wonder about the reckless judgment that encouraged an internal uprising against Saddam Hussein, which resulted in thousands of refugees dying on the Iraq-Turkey border. These events and others serve to remind Americans that this is an administration which lacks abiding principles, which substitutes today's pragmatism for long-term policy.

The Record of Electoral Results

While Republican leaders profess to be pleased with poll results that show a shift in their direction (in terms of party identification), more skeptical observers realize that the post-war glow has distorted the political scene in the near term. Polls are merely fairly reliable "snapshots" of public opinion at particular points in time. When compared to similar measurements over a longer period, they help us understand shifts in voter attitudes and concerns. But, in designing political strategies, polls must be compared to and matched against other data, including actual voter performance.

Democratic performance in races for the US House of Representatives, the Senate, state legislatures, and governorships has been consistently high over the past two decades. In the House, the Democratic majority has averaged 265 seats (out of 435) since 1976, for an average margin over the Republicans of 95 seats. Although the Senate went Republican in 1980 and remained in the GOP column until 1986, Democrats have still averaged 53 seats (out of 100) since 1976. The party's performance at the state level has been equally impressive. Since 1976, Democrats have managed to hold an average of 33 governorships, to only 17 for our Republican competitors. Of 99 state legislative chambers (Nebraska's legislature is unicameral), our margin has ranged from a low of 59 to 40 (in 1984) to a high of 68 to 31 (in 1976). Today it's 60 to 39.

In actual voting, then, Americans back candidates they trust to deal with issues most important to them, like reducing unemployment, strengthening schools, providing better health care, improving transit, roads and highways, and protecting the environment. In a recent Wall Street Journal/NBC poll, respondents trusted Democrats to do a better job than Republicans on all of these issues—in some cases by more than a two-to-one margin.

Bullish on '92

Next year Americans will base their electoral choices on which party best represents the needs and concerns of

voters with special interest planks for their divergent constituencies. But what we need now is for the President to give the voters a sense of the direction in which he will take the country not if—but when—he is reelected.

This focused victory will give him a mandate to go back to Congress after his second inauguration with a whirlwind of legislation, instead of having to pin his hopes on a bipartisan breeze that would, in fact, never materialize. The 101st Congress voted against the Administration more often than any Congress in the past decade. The Democrats have no interest in bipartisanship. If the President wants to make the most of the next four years, the way to do so is to build a mandate for change in 1992.

The Republican Congressional Committee's post-election survey in 1990 found that 55% of voters thought it made little difference whether a Democrat or a Republican represented them in Congress. That view has developed largely because it's been a long time since anyone made an issue of Congress in a presidential year. The last time was the famous 1948 campaign against the "Do Nothing 88th Congress," a master stroke of setting up the House Republicans to take the fall in a presidential campaign.

Split Government: An Accident That's Been Allowed to Happen

Back in 1984, then-Speaker Tip O'Neill advanced the theory that voters wanted Democrats to run Congress while Republicans hold the presidency. It was his way of making the best of a year when Reagan was reelected by a landslide, and his hand-picked candidate, Geraldine Ferraro, became a drag on the Democratic ticket. Now, some serious thinkers and political scientists advance this ludicrous theory as though it has real explanatory power.

Split government endures because incumbents have made it harder for challengers to unseat them, and we haven't had a highly-charged partisan campaign with clear agendas articulated since 1980. But in 1992 the opportunity is present for energizing voters, enlarging GOP turnout over most presidential years, and building on the party's base. GOP campaign professionals have played a good defensive game in recent election years. Now is the time to wage an aggressive, issues-driven campaign which will not only leave President Bush with a mandate but also more control over Congress in his second term.

Edward J. Rollins is a Republican strategist and a partner with Sawyer/Miller Group

the hard-pressed middle class—and Democrats will fare very well. In addition, Democrats have consistently fielded better congressional candidates and have run better grassroots-driven campaigns than have our GOP counterparts. That tradition will continue in 1992.

House Democrats are in the third year of a four year plan, the first half of which was dedicated to building their majority before the '92 presidential cycle. We now have 267 seats in the House of Representatives—our third highest margin this century, and 25 more than a decade ago. Through IMPAC 2000, the Democratic committee which focuses on state races where redistricting is a factor, we've had enormous success. In 19 states, including Florida and Texas, Democrats control the entire redistricting process. Republicans run the whole show in just three.

There's a lot of press talk about a "lack" of declared or obvious Democratic presidential contenders. As one who has operated in the national political arena for 20 years, I see no cause for alarm at this supposedly "late start." DNC Chair Ron Brown points out how useless it would have been to have had Democratic presidential candidates running around the county looking for votes during the Gulf crisis. Besides, we're really not late at all. Jimmy Carter hadn't yet made his first trip to Iowa at this point in the 1976 cycle. How many average voters—not the press types who flock to the Savery Hotel bar in Des Moines or the Wayfarer's watering hole in Manchester—complain that presidential campaigns are too short? A shorter pre-nomination contest may well result in a more vigorous, more interesting campaign.

It is also true that, beyond its position on key issues—where it is clearly in concert with the majority view—the Democratic party is in an excellent position to convey its capacity to govern. With steady and impressive leaders such as Tom Foley, Dick Gephardt, and George Mitchell increasingly well known to the public, this objective will be accomplished over the next several months.

So, the media wizards and cocktail party sages who have already written off the Democrats in 1992 should be a little less cocky. Eighteen months is an eternity in American politics, and personal popularity is ephemeral. More issues cut for the Democrats than against us—a fact which will be at the heart of our strategy throughout the coming campaign. What's more, I always answer those who ask me how we can beat George Bush, or counter his popularity: "Remember, this is the guy whose very first 'presidential' decision was the selection of Dan Quayle to be vice president. He's capable of anything!"

Leslie Francis is executive director of the Democratic Congressional Campaign Committee