

New Hampshire Redux

By R. Kelly Myers

The importance of the New Hampshire presidential primary is an indisputable fact of American politics. As curious as it may be, New Hampshire primary voters exert an inordinate influence over the process of selecting the nation's presidents. Other states have tried to increase their influence in the nominating process by scheduling their primaries earlier in the election year, and a few have even tried to schedule their primaries before New Hampshire's. But so far, no state has been able to usurp New Hampshire's privileged "first-in-the-nation" primary status. In fact, it is somewhat ironic that the current scramble for influence among states in various regions of the country will, in all likelihood, only serve to further heighten the importance of the New Hampshire primary and shorten the "winnowing" process to a matter of weeks rather than months. It is therefore useful to examine the sentiment of voters in New Hampshire and consider how the public's mood might affect the 1996 primary campaign.

The 1992 NH Presidential Primary

The dominant theme of the 1992 New Hampshire presidential primary election was the economy. No single issue preoccupied the minds of voters in both the Republican and Democratic primaries more than a shared concern for ending the recession. Indeed, the importance of the economy predominated in the general election and ultimately proved to be Bill Clinton's most effective weapon against George Bush. But during the primary, when the election threatened to become a media circus amidst scandals concerning Clinton's alleged marital infidelities and draft evasion, polls consistently found that voters were less concerned with these personal issues than they were with how the candidates planned to turn the economy around, especially in hard-hit

New Hampshire.

In the Republican primary, Pat Buchanan hammered away at George Bush's economic record, paying particular attention to his broken pledge of "no new taxes." Buchanan ended up with 37% of the Republican vote, a jarring rebuke for the Bush campaign. But the Buchanan shock wave did not resonate throughout the rest of the country. His short-lived success can be explained in part by the fact that his sup-

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port in New Hampshire was soft. Exit polls showed that over half of those who voted for Buchanan did so because they wanted "to send a message" to Bush protesting their economic distress, not because they actually endorsed Buchanan's more conservative political agenda.

On the Democratic side, Paul Tsongas and Bill Clinton also stressed the economy, more so than any of the other Democratic candidates. Both put forth booklets outlining a plan for fixing the nation's economy. The most controversial difference between Tsongas' "An Economic Call to Arms" and Clinton's "A Plan for America's Future" was a

middle-class tax cut, a plan favored by Clinton and ridiculed by Tsongas. But despite real differences in the approaches outlined by both candidates, their success in the primary can be explained in part by the fact that both offered voters a plan of action.¹ In all likelihood, it was probably not the content of the plans that mattered most but the fact that the candidates had a plan at all; a lesson that Republicans in Congress used with success in the 1994 election.

The New Mood in New Hampshire

It is unlikely that the issue of the economy will dominate the 1996 primary election the way it did in 1992. Since the last primary contest, New Hampshire's economy has experienced a marked turnaround, changing the political landscape in important ways. As shown in Figure 1, the state's unemployment rate has been cut nearly in half since February 1992. The current figure of 4.1% is the lowest unemployment rate registered in the past several years. Trends in annual income gathered through quarterly statewide polls also document the state's improving economy.² In 1991, 32% of residents said their annual income had increased during the past year, while almost the same number (28%) reported a decrease. In the March 1995 statewide poll, the number of families reporting an increase (43%) was much higher than the number reporting a decrease (14%).

Perhaps the most striking change brought about by the state's improving economy is a general improvement in the political mood of the electorate. In December 1991, on the eve of the last New Hampshire primary, only about one-fourth of the citizens were satisfied with the way things were going in New Hampshire—two-thirds were dissatisfied (Figure 2). Quarterly polls con-

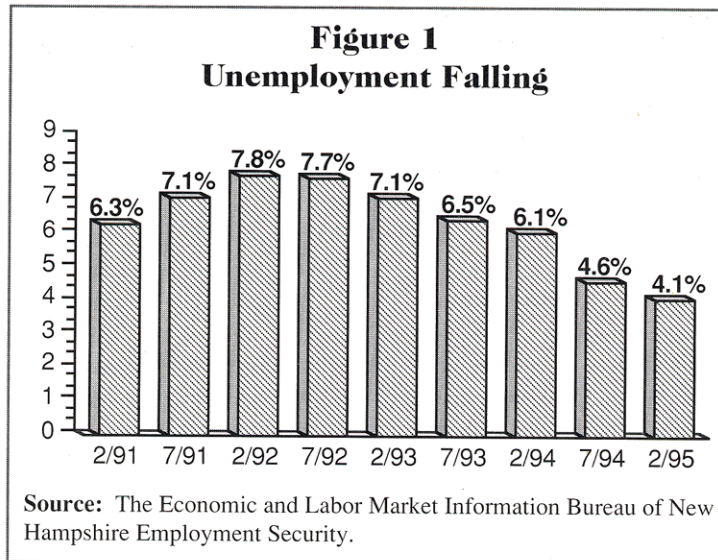
ducted over the past several years show a complete turnaround in the public's mood. In the most recent poll, 67% of citizens say they are satisfied with the way things are going in New Hampshire, while only 27% are dissatisfied. These results point to a much more sanguine political mood in the state.

At the national level, New Hampshire citizens also express greater satisfaction with the way things are going. On the eve of the 1992 primary only 19% of residents said they were satisfied with the way things were going in the US. That figure increased to 43% in the March 1995 poll.

It is worth noting that the most dramatic improvement in political mood has occurred among Republican and independent voters. Among Republicans, for example, satisfaction with the way things are going in the country increased from 26 to 46% since the end of 1991. And at the state level, satisfaction increased from 37 to 79%!

Improving Consumer Confidence

Additional evidence of the public's improving mood can be found in consumer confidence figures. In the most recent state-wide poll, the New Hampshire Consumer Confidence Index registered 101.2, a figure double that recorded on the eve of the last primary. Most of the increase in consumer optimism can be explained by the dra-



matic increase in the Present Situation Index. This index is based on two questions which ask about current economic conditions in the state. The index has increased substantially from a near low of 9.3 in December 1991 to a record high of 95.6 in September 1994. Despite a slight dip to 78.0 in the most recent poll, the index continues to show real improvement in the economy.

Looking Ahead to the 1996 Primary

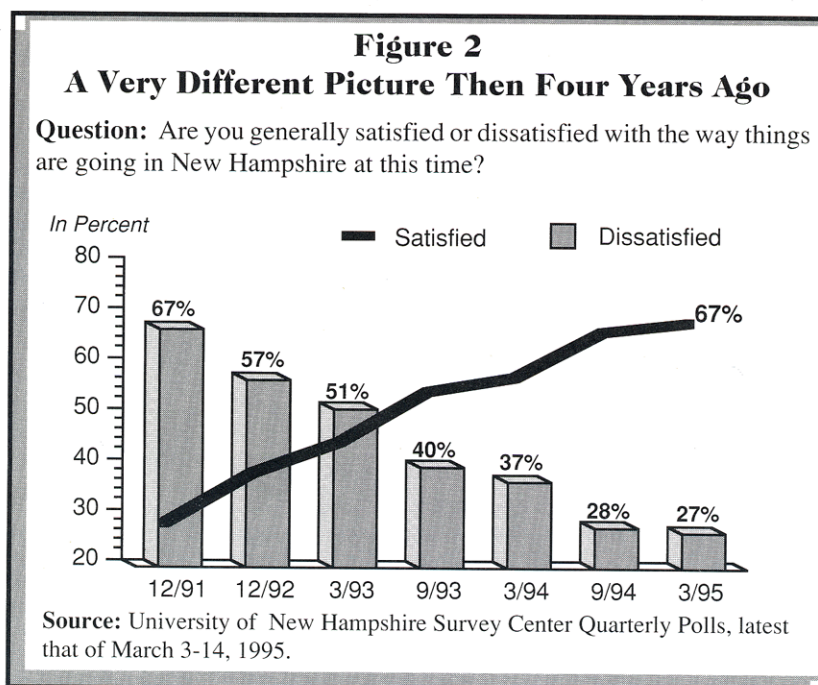
During the 1992 primary all of the candidates in the Democratic and Re-

publican primaries tried desperately to empathize with an anxious electorate concerned about jobs and the recession. Those who succeeded in New Hampshire did so by appealing to voters' sense of anxiety and frustration with the performance of the economy. But if current trends hold, it is unlikely that the economy will be the predominant theme of the 1996 New Hampshire primary campaign. It would be foolish to argue that the economy will not be an important issue, but the politics of electoral commiseration so important in the Democratic and Republican primaries in 1992 will not be as salient in 1996.

Standing in unemployment lines and shaking hands with workers outside of closed factories will be much less compelling reasons to vote for a candidate in 1996 than they were in 1992.

Recent successes achieved by the Republican party provide some suggestive answers about the issues and campaign themes likely to be important during the 1996 presidential primary. During the 1994 elec-

tion, the Republican party made significant gains in the state legislature and won back the only major political office held by a Democrat, the state's second congressional district seat. The GOP's virtual monopoly over politics in the state is consistent with a change in the public's view toward the parties. Poll results from the past several years show a striking increase in the



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public's perception that the Republican party is better able to handle the state's problems (Table 1). In 1991, about one-third (33%) of state residents said the Republican party was better able to deal with problems in the state. The political fortunes of the Republican party have improved steadily over time, and now 51% of state residents endorse the GOP's agenda for New Hampshire.

One underlying reason for the GOP's success in New Hampshire is a renewed pledge to a relatively simple political philosophy. The central tenet of the state's GOP philosophy holds that the best government is the one that *taxes* least. The Republican candidates who have succeeded in New Hampshire have done so by endorsing a platform that combines fiscal conservatism and a commitment to reduce the size and scope of government. Republican governor Stephen Merrill, for example, has earned consistently high approval ratings

by opposing any new broad-based tax and championing local control over decision-making. His success is also due in part to his ability to balance the state's budget during financially troubled times. This may turn out to be an important lesson about the Republican electorate given recent polls which show that deficit reduction is far and away the single most important issue on the minds of Republican primary voters.³

It is also useful to consider the issues which successful Republican candidates have *not* stressed in recent years. Abortion, for example, is rarely discussed, in part because the majority of Republican voters in New Hampshire are pro-choice. For example, in the February 1995 poll, 52% of Republican

primary voters considered themselves pro-choice and only 29% pro-life. In fact, the libertarian oriented Republican electorate is generally unreceptive to conservative social policies which often work well for Republican candidates in other parts of the country.

Conclusion

It would be a mistake to overemphasize the optimism of the New Hampshire electorate. The economy has improved in New Hampshire, but there is still a sense that the country is headed in the wrong direction. Again, more people

most qualified to carry forward the agenda that helped the party capture control of Congress in 1994. The Republicans were quite successful in mobilizing the political discontent of the national electorate in the last general election. But it is less obvious how the Republican contenders will be able to use that message against each other in a single-party contest with voters who are increasingly satisfied with the political and economic situation in New Hampshire and the country.

Endnotes:

¹ Despite the widespread view that Tsongas did well in the New Hampshire primary because he was a regional candidate, his background in Massachusetts politics was not the main reason for his success in the Democratic primary. In fact, Tsongas started out with relatively low name recognition among Democratic primary voters and gradually built a coalition of support which centered around his centrist economic platform.

² All of the survey results presented in this article are based on a series of quarterly polls of the New Hampshire adult population (age 18 and older) conducted by the UNH Survey Center. Each poll includes at least 500 respondents.

³ In a poll conducted February 15-16, 1995, 28% of Republican primary voters identified deficit reduction as the most important problem the candidates should be talking about. The economy showed up second on the list, identified by 15% of voters.

Table 1
Republicans Rising

Question: Which party is better able to handle problems in NH?

	1991	1992	1993	1994	1995
Republicans	33%	37%	38%	43%	51%
Democrats	23	28	28	24	18
Equally	6	6	6	7	5
Neither	13	12	12	12	9
No Answer	25	17	16	14	17

Source: University of New Hampshire Survey Center Quarterly Polls, latest that of March 3-14, 1995.

say they are dissatisfied (51%) than satisfied (43%) with the way things are going in the US. These findings are consistent with a growing archive of national polling data replete with evidence of the country's anti-incumbent and anti-Washington mood. But the angry mood of the electorate in New Hampshire has waned substantially as a result of the state's economic turnaround, and current trends point to an increasingly satisfied public.

It is difficult to predict how the public's more optimistic mood will affect the 1996 primary, especially on the Republican side where the turnaround has been relatively dramatic. So far, each of the GOP hopefuls has tried to position themselves as the candidate



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