

This Race is Nearly Over— Clinton Will Be a Two-term President

by Guy Molyneux

In the coming months, extraordinary resources will be devoted to measuring the public's presidential preference. At least one national media poll plans daily tracking from Labor Day through to the eve of the election. Political journalists and pundits will monitor poll results closely, analyzing the impact of various issues, ads, the conventions, and the debates.

Unfortunately for political junkies—but happily for Democrats—this is likely to prove rather uninteresting fare. For if we look at current poll results in historical context, it is hard to avoid the conclusion that this race is nearly over. Bill Clinton must now be considered the prohibitive favorite to win in November. Even the combination of a lackluster Clinton campaign and a brilliant Dole effort—an improbable scenario today—would probably not change the outcome. Only a disturbing external development—a stock market crash, a dramatic Whitewater development or American blood spilled in Bosnia—can get Bob Dole back into this race. While such developments are of course possible, Bill Clinton is nonetheless the odds-on favorite to gain reelection. (Though please allow me, as a loyal Democrat, to knock on wood here.)

Moreover, the most likely scenario is that Clinton will lead in the polls wire-to-wire, and win the election by a comfortable margin. The greatest suspense, in polling terms, will be whether Dole can eke out a one- or two-point gain in the polls on the closing evening of the GOP convention. When the story of 1996 presidential polling is written, it will be called "Flatliners."

Incumbent Elections

National surveys to date consistently show Bill Clinton with double-digit leads over Bob Dole. Clinton leads by 17 points in the most recent NBC News/*Wall Street Journal* poll, by 16 points in the latest Gallup/CNN/*USA Today* poll, and by 22 according to a recent ABC/*Washington Post* survey. Even more significant than the margin between the candidates is Clinton's level of support, which is now consistently in the mid-50s. Bob Dole could win over every single currently undecided voter, and still lose decisively. Even in the three-

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way race with Ross Perot, surveys show that Clinton enjoys a commanding lead with support close to 50%.

But isn't November a long way off? Not anymore. That case could be made last fall, when Clinton first established a statistically significant lead over Dole. There was good reason for caution then, as poll numbers one year out can indeed prove poor predictors of the final outcome. In December of 1979 and 1991, incumbents Jimmy Carter (59%) and George Bush (54%) still looked very strong.

But once you get a few months into the year, and the identity of the challenger is known, voters start to choose sides fairly quickly. When incumbent presidents are on the ballot, the race generally takes shape early and does not change much after the nominees are established (see Table 1).

Table 1
Popularly-Elected Presidents Seeking a Second Term

	May Approval Rating	May Trial Heat	Final Vote
Eisenhower (1956)	69%	62%	58%
Nixon (1972)	62	53	62
Carter (1980)	38	40	41
Reagan (1984)	54	53	59
Bush (1992)	40	35	38
Clinton (1996)	53	56	??

Source: Surveys by the Gallup Organization, latest that of May 28-29, 1996.

What is most striking about the data in Table 1 is the fundamental stability of the figures. In each case, the public had arrived at an assessment of the incumbent that was clearly positive or negative, and in no case did this evaluation subsequently change. No incumbent with Bill Clinton's current level of support—as measured in trial heats and job approval—has ever been defeated, or even had a close result.

In four of these six elections, the candidate with the lead in May went on to win in November. And the two apparent exceptions—1980 and 1992—do not truly challenge the notion of stability, because they were three-way races. Unpopular incumbents Carter and Bush had illusory leads produced by the strong May showings of third-party candidates John Anderson (21%) and Ross Perot (30%). The high level of support for these independent candidates was of course another signal of Bush's and Carter's weakness, and when the independent candidate support eventually declined, the major-party challenger prevailed.

Campaign '96

conducted since September, when Clinton first took his lead. These totals actually understate the magnitude of Clinton's current lead considerably, because they include data from late 1995 when the race was closer, but are useful for illustrating the relative breadth of the two candidates' support. Note the relatively few subgroups within which Dole is competitive, compared to those where Clinton leads by comfortable margins.

The regional figures are particularly significant, as they undercut one possible hope for the GOP: that despite poor national totals, the electoral college might offer more hospi-

Table 3
In the Trial Heats, Dole is Competitive Only
in Narrow Segments of the Electorate

	Clinton lead
All Registered Voters	12%
Education:	
High school or less	18
Some college	10
College graduate	-1
Postgraduate	13
Occupation x Gender:	
Blue collar men	12
Blue collar women	15
White collar men	-5
White collar women	18
Household Income:	
Under \$30,000	25
\$30,000—49,999	10
\$50,000 and over	1
Region:	
New England	28
Mid-Atlantic	25
South	-1
Midwest	13
Mountain west	1
Pacific west	18

Note: Combined sample size of registered voters for the five surveys is 6,986. Results by "Household Income" are calculated based on voters age 18 to 64.

Source: Surveys by NBC/WSJ, combined results September 1995 through May 1996.

table terrain. In fact, Clinton would win an electoral college landslide today. He leads by healthy margins everywhere but in the South and Mountain West, and recent state-level polls show significant Clinton leads in virtually every major swing state, including California, Georgia, Illinois, Michigan, New Jersey, Ohio, Pennsylvania, and Wisconsin (with Clinton at 50% or over in each case).

The other straw sometimes grasped by Republicans (or pundits in need of stimulation) is that Ross Perot, or a Perot surrogate, will yet make this a three-way race. While the old conventional wisdom held that this helps Clinton, a "new" wisdom has emerged suggesting that a Perot candidacy benefits Dole. Don't be misled—the old conventional wisdom was, and still is, right.

The Perot-hurts-Clinton idea stems mainly from the fact that Clinton's lead in three-way trial heats often declines compared with his lead in two-way matchups. But that is simply a function of Clinton's enormous lead—mathematically, adding Perot to the mix almost has to reduce the point spread. What matters is whether Clinton voters defect to Perot at a higher rate than Dole voters, and they do not. More fundamentally, Clinton already has 40% of the electorate firmly committed, and it's hard to imagine him getting less than his 1992 vote of 43%, thus making it a virtual impossibility for Dole to win a 3-way race. Dole needs to go one-on-one with Clinton to have a chance.

Is Clinton Reagan?

The parallels between 1996 and 1984 look stronger all the time. Ronald Reagan had generally poor marks in the first two years of his term, and took a serious licking in the first mid-term election. But he regained his footing, saw his approval ratings move up above 50%, and then never trailed in an election-year poll. He faced the senior leader of the opposing party—respected by many, but widely seen as lacking charisma and vision—and of course won in a landslide.

Could Clinton win such an overwhelming victory? Not long ago this seemed inconceivable, and it still must be considered unlikely. For one thing, Clinton starts out weaker, having received only 43% of the vote in his first race. More importantly, the country is not feeling nearly as good about itself as it did in 1984. Just 28% say we're heading in the right direction, compared to 52% who say things are off on the wrong track. That would not seem to be the kind of environment that produces landslide reelection for an incumbent president.

However, there is an additional factor this year that makes uncertain the electoral impact of public dissatisfaction. The unprecedented prominence of the Republican-controlled Congress makes it hard to predict whom angry voters will blame for the country's ills. In the past, the relationship between satisfac-

tion with the country's direction and voting for president was very strong. In October 1992, just 15% of those who felt the country was on the wrong track said they would vote for George Bush the following month. In 1996, however, 39% of those unhappy with the country's direction say they would vote for Bill Clinton over either Bob Dole or Ross Perot. Even when the electorate is limited to those who believe the country is on the wrong track, incumbent Bill Clinton is tied for first!

This is possible because the Republican Congress is both unpopular and seen as very powerful. While 55% believe Clinton deserves reelection today, just 43% say this of the Republican Congress. And where Clinton's job approval ratings are in the mid-50s, those disapproving of the job Congress is doing has swelled to 68%. Because Clinton has the GOP Congress as his foil, we can no longer rule out a Clinton landslide (the fact that his opponent had been the senior member of the Republican Congressional leadership also helps).

Reelection is Highly Probable, But Not Inevitable

Can anything avert a Clinton vic-

tory? Of course. Clinton's reelection is highly probable, but not inevitable. Polls suggest that the nomination of Gen. Colin Powell as Dole's running mate makes the race significantly closer, although there is no precedent for a vice-presidential candidate having this much impact (count me as skeptical). In any event, a Dole-Powell ticket is considered extremely unlikely by most informed observers.

The other way the race could change is an external shock to the system. A major foreign policy reversal, or dramatic negative economic or social developments at home, could still shift the context of the election. Similarly, if new evidence emerges showing Bill or Hillary Clinton's guilt in the Whitewater affair, that could change the nature of the race. Since this election will ultimately be a referendum on Bill Clinton, the public will have to fundamentally change its assessment of his presidency for the current dynamic to change.

Conversely, the campaigns to which we all pay so much attention will probably have a limited impact. Bob Dole can retire from the Senate; he can talk about tax cuts or affirmative action; he can hire this or that strategist—it doesn't

really matter. The hard truth today is that Bob Dole is no longer the master of his own fate—he could run a perfect campaign, and still get trounced. This election is out of his control.

This fall, voters will of course see the television ads and watch the presidential debates. They will take one last hard look at Bill Clinton and Bob Dole (and perhaps Ross Perot) before making their final decision. But that doesn't mean they will have an open mind. The question they will be asking is not "which candidate should I support?", but rather "have these candidates given me any reason to change my mind?" Historically, the answer is almost always no.

Endnote: All data reported within this article without a particular source attribution are from the NBC/WSJ poll conducted by Hart-Teeter Research, May 10-14, 1996.



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The Coming Punishment of Bill Clinton

by David Hill

Presidential elections are a disconcerting anomaly in an era where the political "sciences" seem to be able to explain or even predict many important political events. But predicting presidential elections remains more of a roll of the dice than a dazzling empirical exercise. Why? It stems in largest part from what an empiricist would refer to as the "small n" problem. There simply haven't been enough presidential elections under enough varying conditions to develop a model that inspires much confidence.

Retrospective Voting

Despite this important caveat that should be invoked before advancing a hypothesis of what will happen in 1996, it

seems reasonable to propose that this election is likely to be decided by what political scientists have come to refer to as "retrospective voting." And furthermore, it seems reasonable to look very hard at the 1980 presidential election for a model of how this might transpire during the next six months. As in 1980, we may see the polls criss-cross and a late surge determine the winner.

The concept of retrospective voting, like most good theory, is simple and remarkably straightforward. One group of social scientists has explained it this way:

"An individual who votes against the incumbent because the incumbent failed, in the voter's opinion, to perform adequately is said to have cast a 'retrospective' vote. Retrospective voting is, in effect, a referendum on the incumbent. Either the president did well during the last four years and, therefore, should be returned to office, or he performed poorly and the 'rascal' should be 'thrown out'."¹