

Electoral Setting: The Public's Views of National Performance

Each presidential election occurs in a setting that's defined by a variety of factors. Among them: the relative underlying strength of the political parties and voters' judgments on their current performance; the public's feelings about the presidential candidates themselves; where the country stands "philosophically," compared to the parties' stands; and whether Americans are in a "things are good—let's continue" mood, or whether "it's time for a change." As to the latter factor, an incumbent running for reelection is obviously advantaged when voters are generally feeling good.

What's the nation's mood now in campaign '96? To provide a little context for answering this question, we show the public's response to a series of basic mood indicators in a number of earlier years: 1979-80, when rather deep pessimism reigned; 1985-86, when optimism was notably high; 1992, when public dissatisfaction, prompted in particular by the recession, had risen sharply; and then during the last election two years ago, when the public saw economic gains but expressed strong dissatisfaction with current political performance. Overall, this year's numbers on a diverse set of mood indicators show far greater optimism than what prevailed in the late 1970s, though less than what the country experienced in the mid-1980s.

Some things change little over time. Asked to assess the fundamentals of their society, Americans have declared themselves highly supportive and optimistic at every point when poll soundings have been taken—and this is certainly true now in 1996 (p. 21).

Many surveys show the public fairly satisfied with the country's current economic performance—vastly more so than it was four years ago. At the same time, though, there remains a strong undercurrent of economic concern (p. 22). Interestingly, when asked how they would rate the economic conditions now prevailing nationally, Republicans and Democrats, and Clinton and Dole supporters, differ little (p. 23). But when asked in the same Gallup surveys whether things *are now improving*—on the Democratic president's watch—partisans differ sharply. Republicans are much more likely than Democrats to say that, right now, economic conditions in the country are getting worse.

Despite relative overall satisfaction with the economy, the national mood is far from buoyant this election year. We think we are succeeding economically—but we're far less confident about performance in broad social areas sometimes captured by "the moral dimension." A certain element of "values nostalgia" has probably always been present: Maybe we're not performing today up to the standards of yesteryear. Such responses occur in large part, it seems, because the only problems we have to confront are today's; yesterday's are for the history books. Still, it is striking that a comprehensive survey on the national mood taken in early May by Chilton Research for ABC's World News Tonight, found 67% of respondents saying that the country "is in a long-term moral decline," while only 31% declared its moral standing "basically pretty solid (p. 24)." In areas from drug abuse and crime to school performance and the status of the family, Americans see too much going wrong to really feel good.

—Everett Ladd