

THE NATIONAL MOOD:

INTERVIEW WITH PETER HART

Public Perspective: From your NBC News/Wall Street Journal polling and other work you're doing, what do you see as the nation's mood this election year?

Hart: Overall, I would say that the mood is positive. That is, when you ask the voters "Are things headed in the right direction, or off on the wrong track?", they are saying things are headed in the right direction. This does not, however, make 1990 a status quo election year. Instead, what we find in the NBC/Wall Street Journal poll, when voters are given a choice between two statements and asked which is closer to their point of view, statement (A) which reads, "The president and the Congress should adopt a steady-as-you-go approach and not make major changes," or statement (B) "The president and the Congress should adopt an approach that seeks to make major changes and looks to shake things up," voters opt for (B)—to make major changes. The margin here is a substantial 54% to 36%. Even 44% of Republicans look for change. So, while the voters are not unhappy with where we are at present, they don't think we should just mark time. There are things to be done.

PP: So, we are seeing a swing back toward a more activist cycle?

Hart: I think that we're definitely going into a more activist cycle—in a whole series of areas that relate to our domestic agenda. When asked in the NBC/WSJ poll if we're spending too much, too little, or about right in a series of areas, the only two where the public says we are spending too much is on aid to foreign countries (71% feel that way), and defense (where 56% feel that we're spending too much). On helping the homeless, 79% say we are spending *too little*; on education, 76% say too little; health care, 71% say too little; on fighting drugs it's 67% too little; and on the environment, 65%. The support we're seeing is bi-partisan. Remember the question gives three options—too much, too little, and about right. When you have at least two-thirds of the public saying too little, you get a clear sense they want some action. That's an important part of the mood in 1990.

PP: What about congressional incumbents?

Hart: This is a year where the incumbents had

better watch out. There is a tendency to say, "Look, 98% of all congressional incumbents get reelected. They're safe." But I see different things happening in my data which suggest that the public wants to make changes. When we ask whether they would like somebody who is experienced, or somebody who is new ["Which do you feel is more important, electing an experienced person with a proven record in Washington, or electing someone new with fresh approaches to change things in Washington?"], voters consistently opt for a fresh approach. We see the same thing on another front when we ask, "Do you think there should or should not be a limit to the number of terms to which a senator or a member of congress could be elected?" By about two- and -a-half to one, the public favors a term limit. All of these things suggest to me that incumbents are going to have to earn their way back. Challengers are going to have a good opening in running against things that are not working.

The other point that I would make is that for all the things happening the public is cautious. When we ask whether it is better to have the Congress and the presidency under the control of one or different parties, they endorse split control by two-and-a-half to one. They want a check to make sure we don't go too far. Part of this has to do with the whole question of the budget. While George Bush personally is at an all-time high in both job rating and how he is viewed personally, when we ask the public who they trust more to make the right decisions on federal budget deficit cuts -- 28% say the president and 55% say the Congress.

PP: Have Americans sorted this out? They want Democrats in control in Congress to check the Republican executive, yet they want new blood in Congress, which would mean making a party change.

Hart: The public doesn't try to sort this out. They really want to send a message to everybody: "Clean up your act, do our work, and understand our priorities." And, I think they will make choices based on this. It could be a year where you could get some surprising upsets, including of House veterans. Over the years we've asked the question, "Would you vote to re-elect this person, consider someone else, or vote to replace this person?". It's been a marvelous gauge of where an elected official stands. My rough yardstick has usually been that if 50% or more say "re-elect," he is solid. If 40%, he is odds-on to win. Below 40%, "Watch out — you're going to have to work to win this one." The thing that surprised me this year is that in both

senatorial and gubernatorial polls that we've done - and I don't want to speak for the House, because we've done only a limited number of House races—the “re-elect” proportions have gone down. I find more people who look in their job rating and general personal approval ratings to be in fairly solid shape, down at 35% or even slightly below that in terms of “vote to reelect.” That tells you something about the skepticism toward incumbents.

PP: What else can be said about the 1990 elections? What about Bush's role?

Hart: While we know things can change, my feeling is that George Bush will be largely irrelevant, in terms of being a voting determinant. This is in sharp contrast to the Reagan years where everything played off Ronald Reagan— all the hate or all the adoration played directly off him. If I remember the slogan the Republicans used in 1982, it was “Stay the Course.” And, the Democrats played off Reagan that year, too. In 1990, on both sides each candidate will be on his own hook.

PP: Some Democrats are saying that “the spirit of the times” is swinging their way after a time when it belonged to the Republicans. Arthur Schlesinger, Jr. has, of course, posited liberal and conservative cycles. In his view, the country's now entering a liberal cycle. Do you see any basis for such argument?

Hart: I'm skeptical that we are suddenly moving into a period of liberalism. As I have said, I think the period we're moving into involves increased activism—which doesn't necessarily mean liberalism. I think the labels—liberal and conservative—have less relevance than they did in the past anyway. In some respects we've been moving both left and right simultaneously. For example, many young people are embracing progressive ideas in lifestyle and conservative ideas in economics.

PP: Where does your analysis of Americans' thinking lead you as to the ideal Democratic presidential nominee for 1992?

Hart: First, this Democrat has to be able to reassure the voters on those qualities where people are most uncertain about electing a Democratic president. That includes especially national defense, fiscal responsibility, and family values. Second, this Democrat must be able to give coherence to the changes Americans are groping toward. It's going to

take someone willing to “break the mold”—while providing voters with reassurance in the areas I've indicated. My sense is that we are too enamored with Bush's high approval ratings. A lot will change in the next two years, and what a candidate shouldn't try to do is build a strategy off George Bush but rather off of where he will take the nation.

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Let me summarize what I see as the key political currents carrying us into the 1990s.

1. Politicians had better not take the voters for granted. There is a hard edge of skepticism out there. The politicians are going to have to earn the voters' trust. Many voters are thinking of politicians, “You're out for yourself, not for me.” That's the concern.

2. Americans want some action. They don't want to stand still; there are things that need to be done. There is a sense that we are losing our edge—in economics, in the fabric of our community life, in addressing various issues. The public wants to get on top of the job ahead rather than say—“Nothing bad has happened to us today, so we're OK.”

3. There is a new standard for judging how we are and how we've done. It's much more international—and has a lot to do with competitiveness.

4. At the same time, the old international agenda, built around defense issues, is much less central. Now, in order to be able to mark our place in the world, we need to be able to start solving problems at home—in education, homelessness, etc. We need to save what we have, protect what we've got, and develop what is best. This is certainly the sense with regard to the environment, which is a very strong movement now. In general, there is a strong impulse to invest in people.

On investing in the future and in people, the Democrats have the upper hand—from child care to education to the environment. But George Bush has worked skillfully to cut the Republican disadvantage here—to take issues on which Democrats had a three to one or four to one advantage in the past and reduce it.

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