

**THE NATIONAL MOOD: REPUBLICAN
SUCCESSSES BRING THE PARTY A
NEW CHALLENGE**

**By V. Lance Tarrance, Jr. and
Brian C. Tringali**

The issues that dominate voters' minds have more to do with the general health and well-being of the economy than with any other factor. Economists have told us for some time that consumer behavior at the macroeconomic level is tied closely to the strength or perceived strength of the economy. The general perception of the economy also dictates the issue focus within all sections of the electorate.

When times are tough, voters are concerned with paying their bills and keeping their jobs. They focus on these immediate "pocketbook issues" because they don't think they can afford the luxury of looking beyond them. But when voters feel confident about their economic well-being today, they focus on less immediate, non-economic issues. Thus in times of prosperity, voters focus on "quality of life" concerns. This thesis suggests that America's preoccupation with issues involving the style and quality of life at various times in the past few decades owes much to the substantial overall economic growth the country has achieved.

While the economic trend has been positive for much of the contemporary era, the United States has, of course, experienced downturns. The 1970s, in particular, fostered real economic worry. As the table below illustrates, when Ronald Reagan took office in 1980, the electorate was overwhelmingly concerned about inflation and the high cost of living (and not the country's place on the international stage as some have claimed.)

<u>Most Important Problem</u>	
<u>1980 Averages, Top Five (Gallup)</u>	
1. Inflation, high cost of living	60%
2. International tensions	14
3. Unemployment	12
4. (tie) Energy problems	
Dissatisfaction with government	6

It's often difficult to differentiate between cause and effect, but a heightened concern about the economy continued in the early 1980s, culminating in the 1982 recession. Recently, economists have begun to pay special attention to the role of expect-

tations and their impact on the economy as they design more predictive economic modeling. Long after the recession had ended, voters continued to express concern over unemployment, taxes and general economic troubles.

It's also worth noting that even when the national economy is healthy, voters' worries may be heightened by local conditions. Pockets of economic difficulty can co-exist with general prosperity. For instance, while the oil industry was letting the air out of the Tulsa economy, the US was in a period of sustained expansion. Tulsa remains locked into pocketbook issues.

Most Important Problem
1985 averages

1. Threat of war/ international tensions	24%
2. Unemployment	22
3. Excess government spending/ deficit	15
4. High cost-of-living/taxes	10
5. (tie) Economy in general	
Poverty, hunger	6

Throughout much of the 1980s, then, pocketbook issues continued to reverberate. This gave the Republicans a comfortable issue framework. In fact, the GOP spent much of the time taking credit for the economic resurgence that was ameliorating what had been deep public concern. As the above data indicate, however, by the mid-1980s other needs were coming front-and-center, as economic worries gradually faded.

By the end of the decade, and after 8 years of sustained growth, the economy had finally been pushed off the roster of immediate voter concerns, and other issues rose to fill the vacated space. Drugs are a good case in point. The drug issue is the ultimate example of a quality of life issue. During the 1980s, the drug problem became the issue voters are most concerned about—though surely not because the problem, severe as it is, was actually worsening. In fact, the incidence of drug use was in the late 1980s at last declining. During the 1982 recession, only about 3% of the electorate felt that drugs were the biggest problem. But as economic worries lessened, and the media heightened its focus on the drug problem, public awareness and concern about it grew. Today, almost half of the electorate feel that it is our nation's number one issue. (This experience suggests, of course, that should the nation's economy experience a downturn, the drug issue would lose its current salience.)

Most Important Problem 1989 averages

1. Drugs	43%
2. Poverty, hunger/homelessness	8
3. Federal deficit/failure to balance the budget	6
4. (tie) Trade deficit	
International problems	3

George Bush was elected in part to address a variety of quality of life issues—drugs, education, and the environment, among them. They were on the agenda he inherited—thanks to the economic success of the Reagan years. Until recently, Bush got poor marks on the drug issue. But the message of Panama to the electorate is that something can be done about the drug problem. Bush's standing on the issue has improved.

Still, Republicans are more credible and more comfortable with pocketbook than with quality of life issues. A January 1990 *Washington Post/ABC News* poll showed that a majority of voters trust the GOP to do a better job of maintaining a strong defense (62%), handling foreign affairs (55%), and handling the economy (52%). The GOP is seen championing a more limited domestic role for government: An asset for most of the last decade, this may be a problem in an era when voters are concerned with problems like homelessness, improved education, and the environment, which Democrats are seen better able to handle. Republicans were unable to make gains in Congress during the latter 1980s. They probably won't in the near future either—unless they can gain in the noneconomic performance areas—which are driven by local political climates, not just overall national views.

The question left to George Bush is whether he can reach beyond economic issues and present a picture of what role government should now take in the areas of rising concern. Understanding that a quality of life issue focus is likely to favor Democrats in the short term should not hinder Bush from doing what needs to be done to expand the GOP appeal to the local level.

V. Lance Tarrance, Jr. is CEO/Chairman of the Board, and Brian C. Tringali is Vice President, Political Affairs, Tarrance and Associates, Alexandria, VA.

ABOUT THE ROPER CENTER

The Roper Center is a non-profit educational research organization, in the field of public opinion and public policy. It maintains the largest and most comprehensive collection of public opinion and related survey data, and it promotes their more informed use. Over two thousand journalists, social scientists, students, opinion research professionals, and policy makers use the Center each year. Everett Carlil Ladd, a political scientist, is the Center's executive director and president.

History. The Center was established in 1946, on the campus of Williams College. Elmo Roper made the initial contribution of 177 surveys which his polling group had conducted in the late '30s and early '40s. In the 1950s George Gallup began contributing his polls, and today the Gallup collection is the Center's largest—more than 1500 surveys. The Center moved its offices to the University of Connecticut in 1977.

Holdings. The Roper Center library contains complete interview data in computer form for 8000 major surveys conducted in the US and other countries, as well as printed reports on thousands of other studies. Among the leading survey organizations which deposit their data at the Center are: Gallup; Roper; Yankelovich Clancy Shulman; National Opinion Research Center; Opinion Research Corporation; CBS News/*New York Times* poll; ABC News/*Washington Post* poll; NBC News/*Wall Street Journal* poll; *Los Angeles Times* poll; Canadian Gallup; Social Surveys Ltd. (Gallup) in the UK; and Brulé Ville Associés in France.

POLL. The press and other users can now access a large part of the Center's data directly from computer terminals in their own offices through POLL—the Public Opinion Location Library. POLL is an on-line information retrieval system. As of March 1990, it contained text and responses from more than 135,000 questions asked in national surveys in the US over the last quarter century and right up to date.