

# POLL FINDINGS ON CLINTON'S FIRST YEAR: CAVEAT EMPTOR

By John Brennan

Is Bill Clinton an inept bumbler or the most effective president in decades? A dishonest waffler or shrewd pragmatist? At various points during the last year, he has seemed to be all of these things.

At times even Republicans were impressed with his recuperative powers. "He's risen from his own ashes....," commented Fred Grandy (R-Iowa). *Congressional Quarterly* reported that Congress backed Clinton on 88% of the contested votes in 1993, a record equaled only by Dwight Eisenhower and Lyndon Johnson in their first years in office.

In the world of political punditry, universal truth changes every few days, and memories are particularly short. "The administrative disorder of the first few months of Franklin D. Roosevelt's Presidency has become legendary," wrote Laurin L. Henry in his 1960 account of *Presidential Transitions*. Richard Reeves' new study of John F. Kennedy documents the disastrous missteps by JFK in his opening months. But FDR is hardly legend for his poor management skills. And Kennedy never fell below 70% job approval in Gallup polls during his first year in office. Even Richard Nixon, who like Clinton won election with just a plurality of the vote, stayed above 50% throughout his first 12 months on the job.

## A Difficult Start

Not so Clinton. As of early December, his average first-year Gallup job rating was just 49%. During 1993, his popularity rose no higher than 59% in February; it reached a low of 37% in early June. These are the worst opening year

scores for any president since Gallup began tracking them—with the exception of Gerald Ford's unusual first year following Nixon's resignation. The poll numbers, along with negative fallout from the gays in the military issue, the Branch Davidian affair, the \$200-haircut on the tarmac, etc., early on fueled the story that Clinton was a president dead on arrival. David Shaw observed in a September *Los Angeles Times* (LAT) review of press coverage: "In his first months, Clinton was described as 'inept and indecisive' (LAT); 'embarked on an error-ridden shakedown cruise' (*New York Magazine*); beginning to 'stumble with a certain farcical rhythm'

*For a further review of poll data on Clinton's first year in office, see the Public Opinion and Demographic Report of this issue, pp. 82-86.*

(*Time*); and someone who would 'win weekly on Ted Mack's Amateur Hour' (David Brinkley on ABC)."

Is the press responsible for Clinton's low ratings? Syracuse University political scientist, Thomas Patterson, recently argued in a *New York Times* op-ed piece that Clinton "...has been dogged from the start by hypercritical coverage....In the 1960's, less than a third of the media's evaluative references to political leaders were unfavorable. In the 1980's, nearly two-thirds were." Perhaps the 70% presidential job rating will henceforth be a rare occurrence.

But the press was only part of the story. On his own, Clinton was a controversial nominee who won in a fractured

field and promised massive, quick changes as soon as he arrived in Washington. The combination of a small support base and heightened expectations put him in an especially difficult political position. Unlike George Bush, a transitional politician who garnered broad but shallow support in his opening year, Clinton already seemed well-defined and polarizing when he entered office. Just 22% had no opinion of him in Gallup's post-inauguration survey, half the number who couldn't rate Bush in January 1989. Moreover, despite a temporary burst early in the year, and the pronounced gains at the end, the economy continued to sputter through much of 1993. Low consumer confidence weighs on any president.

Ironically, even when judging him poorly, the public did not buy into the often-heard argument that Clinton was a failed president from the start. As his job ratings sagged in June, two-thirds in a LAT survey still agreed that Clinton's problems were "due mainly to inexperience..." Only 27% felt his troubles meant his presidency was "...in long-term serious troubles." A CBS News/*New York Times* poll got similar results, with only 26% agreeing that Clinton was not up to the job. Many disliked Clinton at that moment, but they were not ready to write him off.

## December Uptick

As of mid-December, Clinton's approval scores seemed on the upswing, though different surveys put different spin on the news. A Times-Mirror poll of December 2-4, 1993, showed Clinton's job score still below 50%, and raised

doubts that economic conditions were helping him much. But a Gallup poll released December 9, which had Clinton at 52%, headlined: "The US Economy: Public Spirits Rising." The December 9 *LAT* survey—in which 55% approved of Clinton—said "Economy and President Viewed More Favorable." As of mid-December, the NBC News/*Wall Street Journal* (NBC/*WSJ*) poll pegged Clinton at 56%, up nine points in two months amidst better economic news.

The general consensus from end-of-the-year surveys was mixed. The public felt somewhat better about financial matters and Clinton's performance than it had during most of the year. For the first time in quite a while, trust in government and confidence in Congress showed some improvement. Most polls indicated that consumer confidence was rising.

These changes, however, were marginal, and wide majorities remained skeptical about the economy and suspicious of government generally. There was no sense that revolutionary changes were afoot in Washington. In the Times-Mirror poll, two-thirds called Clinton effective, a marked improvement from past surveys. But the *LAT* and NBC/*WSJ* polls indicated most still doubted Washington was making much progress to solve the nation's problems.

### The Public's Uncertain Call

The silver lining for Clinton: Americans didn't as yet blame him for the gridlock. In fact, the single most mentioned reason in the *LAT* poll for liking Clinton was not for what he'd accomplished but simply because, "He's trying." Far more gave Clinton an "A" for effort than cited any particular accomplishment. When asked why they liked him, a fair number credited his efforts on health care reform, but few mentioned the passage of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), the Brady gun control bill, or his economic program.

Clinton was a political acrobat last year. To please the populace, he backed

universal healthcare and hiked taxes on the rich; for the centrists and also the conservatives, he favored a tougher stance on welfare and crime. All of these ideas have garnered at least preliminary public support.

Despite a recent jump in the number of Americans concerned about crime, the economy and unemployment remained at year's end the nation's top-cited problems. But polls suggest that the public has a rather fractured agenda right now. Asked in the *LAT* poll to choose among possible policy initiatives that could be passed in 1994, a plurality—but only 33%—opted for job training and unemployment relief. Twenty percent wanted a strong anti-crime bill, and 15% welfare reform.

Only one in four named health care reform as their top legislative priority. This is a double-edged political sword for the president. A public reputedly crying out for action remains basically satisfied with its own health care and vastly uninformed on the details of the debate. Attracted in theory to universal coverage and employer mandates, it is nonetheless anxious about the potential costs of the Clinton plan and inclined to move cautiously on the issue.

Spooked by the federal budget deficit, and pressured by Congress, Clinton has pulled back on most of his campaign ideas for direct government investment in the economy. Instead, the administration hopes the low interest rates, which should come from deficit reduction, will spur growth in the economy overall. The President's political fate ultimately depends on that coming true. He was elected to create jobs; deficit reduction alone is a poor political sell, particularly for a Democrat.

The public is skeptical about whether Clinton can bring about real reduction in the federal budget deficit; just 31% in the new *LAT* survey expect significant deficit reduction during Clinton's term, down from 40% in January 1993. Luckily for the President, the issue seems to have faded in the public's mind; only 5% named

it in December as one of the nation's top two problems, down from 15% at the start of the year.

Clinton's administration has shown some indecisiveness in foreign affairs, and the President's approval ratings in this area are lackluster at best. Unlike Bush and Reagan, his approval scores on foreign policy actually trail his economic ratings, and only 20% in the December *LAT* survey said they have a good idea where he wants to lead the nation internationally. Again luckily for him, foreign relations aren't salient right now. But clearly, the situation could change. Clinton faces the future challenge of defining for the public both his policies and credentials as an international leader.

Clinton overcame persistent questions about his character to win the election, but he is still dogged by a sense among some Americans that he has questionable integrity. Those who viewed Clinton negatively in the December *LAT* poll most often cited perceived waffling on campaign promises, dishonesty, and a feeling that he compromises too much, as reasons they disliked him. A 47% plurality agreed that Clinton is too quick to sacrifice principle for political gain. It remains to be seen how the end-of-the-year charges involving his financial dealings in Arkansas on the one hand, and his sexual conduct on the other, will affect the public's trust.

Clinton's NAFTA victory was won with a flurry of traditional wheeling and dealing, and that may have taken a toll on his image as an agent of change. Only half in the latest *LAT* poll agreed he was trying to bring fundamental change to government, down sharply from the 69% who felt that way last September. Two in five felt he was governing in a "business as usual" fashion, up from 27%. That movement, however, occurred at the same time Clinton's effectiveness scores improved, suggesting that the public may be willing to suffer some old-style horse trading as the price for getting things moving.

## Clinton Strength vis-a-vis Republicans

The Republicans had no cause for glee as Clinton's first year ended, since polls showed the President holding his own against them despite his checkered profile. By 57 to 29%, respondents in the latest *LAT* poll thought the GOP was obstructing Clinton for political reasons rather than offering constructive policy solutions of its own. Two in five believed Clinton had the better proposals for bolstering the economy; just a quarter felt the Republicans had better fixes. The country's top Republican officeholder, Kansas Senator Bob Dole, garnered a 36% favorable rating nationwide, 23 points lower than Clinton's. By 47 to 35%, voters preferred Democratic over Republican candidates in a hypothetical November 1994 congressional face-off. Clinton himself beat a generic Republican presidential candidate by 42 to 33% in the most recent NBC/WSJ survey.

Indeed, the *LAT* survey found 40% of Republicans approving of Clinton in December, a major improvement from most findings in Year One. Clinton seems to have attracted centrist, non-Democratic support without turning off his Democratic base. Despite predictions to the contrary, there is scant evidence of a revolt against Clinton from the left or from union members. After the NAFTA vote, where Clinton parted company with many left-wing and labor Democrats, just 7% of the public and 14% of ideological liberals told the *LAT* poll they felt Clinton was trying too hard to please conservative non-Democrats. A 55% majority of liberals thought Clinton was striking the correct balance between right and left. Sixty-three percent of union members backed Clinton in December, little changed from his pre-NAFTA vote ratings.

If there is particular softness in the President's profile, it seems based on class rather than ideology. Unusual for a Democrat, Clinton's ratings are about as high among affluent, educated, managers as among less-educated, blue-collar Americans (POR, p. 83). Younger blue-collar males—a particularly pessimistic

lot these days—remain doubtful about Clinton and form the core of Ross Perot's shrunken support.

## Perot in Eclipse

Like Clinton, Perot has reaped the rewards and suffered the slings of outrageous punditry this year. In the spring he was ascendant. Some claimed his endorsements would make or break dozens of House candidates in 1994. But what a difference a debate makes! Since his "worse-than-expected" showing in the televised NAFTA sparring with Vice President Al Gore, Perot has gone into a political nose dive. *US News and World*

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*Report surveys in December showed just 28% contemplating a vote for him, down from 45% in May.*

The December *LAT* poll indicated a more successful Clinton seemed to have drawn back some marginal Democratic Perot voters, leaving the rump Perot group as a bigger weight around the Republicans. By 47 to 34%, those currently calling themselves Perot backers (about 10% of the public) identified with the GOP rather than the Democrats; and the group plans to vote Republican for Congress this year, by a 44 to 27% margin. In June, the larger Perot bloc (16% backed him then) was about equally Democratic and Republican. Such statistics have worried GOP strategists. Unless he revives, however, Perot's likely impact on 1994 is questionable.

## Let's Wait and See

Like most presidents before him, Clinton's eventual success will likely hinge on economic factors, many beyond his control. The public jury is still out on his overall economic program, with the

polls sending contradictory signals. The December *LAT* poll showed a 14-point jump since June (from 36 to 50%) in those favorable toward his handling of the economy. At the same time, NBC/WSJ data indicated that almost twice as many felt Clinton's economic policies will hurt (41%) rather than help them personally (22%).

If the roller coaster ride of Clinton's first year teaches anything, it's a lesson much repeated but mostly ignored—that neither polls nor pundits can predict the future. Often they don't even describe the present very well. For example, the events of 1993 may prompt us to reexamine the meaning of the presidential job approval question itself. We know its value a month before an election and in evaluating demographics. But what does it mean now, that Clinton's first-year approval scores are the worst in Gallup history? Does that low rating necessarily mean an ineffective presidency? After all, Clinton won on the budget and on NAFTA.

When asked to prognosticate, Elmo Roper reportedly used to say that if he could predict public opinion he wouldn't measure it. Such an attitude makes for a wise but unpopular pundit. Still, even pundits should be cautious sometimes. Those reading the tea leaves as 1994 begins will discover that Clinton is considerably *less* popular now than was his failed predecessor at this point in *his* term. But Clinton is viewed *more* favorably than the president who served *before* that, the one reelected in a 49-state landslide. Hopefully those facts will serve as a warning to the crop of political fortune-tellers as they gather again in the New Year.

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