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The People, The Press and the President
BUSH'S "QUIET POPULARITY" HIGHER THAN REAGAN'S
AFTER YEAR IN WHITE HOUSE

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WASHINGTON, DC. - As George Bush completes his first year in the White House, he is far more popular than Ronald Reagan was eight years ago, but the American public doesn't think so; and that perception may prove to be as important to the President as his actual standing in the opinion polls.

In the latest Times Mirror Survey, conducted just after Manuel Noriega turned himself over to American authorities, no fewer than 81% of respondents voiced approval of the way George Bush was handling his job. In January of 1982, as the country was slipping into serious recession, only 49% of the public approved of Ronald Reagan's job performance. In fact, through much of his first year Bush's approval score has been ahead of Reagan's at a comparable point in time.

Although Bush's current approval rating is higher than Ronald Reagan ever achieved throughout his two terms, no one is less aware of Bush's popularity than the public itself. When asked by Times Mirror, only 20% of the public had the impression that Bush is more popular than Reagan was eight years ago. Twice as many people felt that Bush is less popular than Reagan was, and 36% felt the two Republican presidents were equally popular.

To some extent, this disparity between perception and reality may be explained by the difference in intensity of public feelings toward the two leaders. But, so far, those differences tend to be relatively small. Over the course of the Reagan presidency, about half of those who approved of the President did so strongly. The public is less enthusiastic in its approval of Bush. In late September, The Washington Post found 38% of those who approved of Bush did so strongly. A month later the gap narrowed in a Gallup Poll, with Bush showing a strong approval ratio of 46 versus Reagan's 51, in November of 1981. These relative differences notwithstanding, there are still more Americans approving of George Bush than of Ronald Reagan at the same point in their presidencies (70% vs. 49%); and in absolute terms more people say they approve strongly of the current President than of Reagan (32% vs. 25%).

Perceptions of Bush's popularity relative to his predecessor's don't have much to do with

Reagan's greater personal charm either. In November when Gallup asked its respondents their opinion of George Bush the man, "apart from the way he is handling his job as president" 84% said they approved of him personally. Eight years ago in response to the same question, Ronald Reagan only achieved a 73% personal approval score. Reagan evoked strong positive feelings among those who liked him but, he also evoked stronger negative feelings from some groups in the population, notably blacks.

He Gets No Attention

George Bush's understated popularity comports with the amount of attention the public has paid to news about the President over the past year. Each month the Times Mirror News Interest Index measures how much attention Americans pay to major national and international news stories. Interest in major news stories about the President has been modest. In October only 15% of the public said they followed very closely news about the "Education Summit" held by Bush and the nation's Governors. A month later the President managed just 5% points more in public attention (20%), when he met with Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev on the stormy seas off Malta. Prior to the invasion of Panama, the only time news about the Bush Administration attracted substantial public attention was in September when the President announced his plan to deal with drug abuse in America. At that point, 40% said they paid very close attention to news about the President's plans to deal with a problem that had become the nation's number one concern.

He Gets a Fair Shake

Whatever the reason for a lack of attention to the President and lack of recognition of his popularity, the public doesn't fault press coverage. Seventy-six percent of Times Mirror respondents say that the news organizations with which they are familiar are fair to the Bush administration. This is a somewhat larger percentage of the public than felt the press was fair to Reagan at the end of his term. In 1988, 66% felt that the press was fair to the Reagan administration. In the pre-Iran/Contra days, about as many saw the press as fair to Reagan as now see the press as fair to Bush (78% June 1985).

If fifty years of history tell us anything, Bush's approval ratings are likely to fall well below their current mark. The question for Bush watchers is whether the President's quiet popularity, at what may be the peak of his approval ratings, can cushion him during the trough in his ratings. In Washington politics, perceptions of popularity count a lot. A serious decline in the approval rating of a popular president, who is not perceived as popular might prove more costly than it did for a leader like Reagan, whose perceived public esteem was often ahead of his actual scores.

SURVEY METHODOLOGY

Times Mirror survey results are based on telephone interviews conducted by The Gallup Organization under the direction of Princeton Survey Research Associates among 1,207 adults, 18 years of age or older, during the period of January 4-7, 1990. For results based on the total sample, one can say with 95% confidence that the error attributable to sampling and other random effects is plus or minus 3 percentage points. In addition to sampling error, one should bear in mind that question wording and practical difficulties in conducting surveys can introduce error or bias into the findings of opinion polls.

TABLES

PRESIDENTIAL APPROVAL RATING

	<u>Approve</u>	<u>Di sapprove</u>	<u>Don' t Know</u>	
TOTAL	81	11	8	= 100
<u>Sex</u>				
Male	80	11	9	= 100
Female	81	11	8	= 100
<u>Race</u>				
White	81	11	8	= 100
Non-white	74	15	11	= 100
<u>Age</u>				
Under 30	83	13	4	= 100
30-49	81	12	7	= 100
50+	79	10	11	= 100
<u>Education</u>				
College graduate	82	12	6	= 100
Other college	85	10	5	= 100
High school graduate	80	11	9	= 100
Less than high school	77	12	11	= 100
<u>Region</u>				
East	83	8	9	= 100
Midwest	80	13	7	= 100
South	80	11	9	= 100
West	80	14	6	= 100
<u>Party ID</u>				
Republican	94	4	2	= 100
Democrat	70	18	12	= 100
Independent	78	12	10	= 100

QUESTION: DO YOU APPROVE OR DISAPPROVE OF THE WAY GEORGE BUSH IS HANDLING HIS JOB AS PRESIDENT?

PRESIDENT'S POPULARITY

	<u>More Popular</u>	<u>Less Popular</u>	<u>About as Popular</u>	<u>Don't Know</u>	
TOTAL	20	40	36	4	= 100
<u>Sex</u>					
Male	19	42	35	4	= 100
Female	21	39	36	4	= 100
<u>Race</u>					
White	20	40	36	4	= 100
Non-white	21	42	31	6	= 100
<u>Age</u>					
Under 30	19	48	32	1	= 100
30-49	20	39	38	3	= 100
50+	20	37	37	6	= 100
<u>Education</u>					
College graduate	22	45	31	2	= 100
Other college	18	42	36	4	= 100
High school graduate	19	40	38	3	= 100
Less than high school	23	34	36	7	= 100
<u>Region</u>					
East	20	41	36	3	= 100
Midwest	20	37	40	3	= 100
South	20	43	31	6	= 100
West	19	42	36	3	= 100
<u>Party ID</u>					
Republican	17	40	41	2	= 100
Democrat	23	41	31	5	= 100
Independent	21	40	34	5	= 100

QUESTION: WHAT'S YOUR IMPRESSION, IS GEORGE BUSH MORE POPULAR THAN RONALD REAGAN WAS AFTER HIS FIRST YEAR IN OFFICE, LESS POPULAR, OR ABOUT AS POPULAR AS RONALD REAGAN WAS AFTER HIS FIRST YEAR IN OFFICE?

FAIRNESS TO THE BUSH ADMINISTRATION

	<u>Fair</u>	<u>Unfair</u>	<u>Don' t Know</u>	
TOTAL	76	14	10	= 100
<u>Sex</u>				
Male	78	14	8	= 100
Female	75	14	11	= 100
<u>Race</u>				
White	75	15	10	= 100
Non-white	84	10	6	= 100
<u>Age</u>				
Under 30	83	14	3	= 100
30-49	79	14	7	= 100
50+	68	15	17	= 100
<u>Education</u>				
College graduate	77	16	7	= 100
Other college	79	15	6	= 100
High school graduate	79	14	7	= 100
Less than high school	67	12	21	= 100
<u>Region</u>				
East	79	12	9	= 100
Midwest	79	13	8	= 100
South	73	16	11	= 100
West	73	16	11	= 100
<u>Party ID</u>				
Republican	68	23	9	= 100
Democrat	84	6	10	= 100
Independent	77	13	10	= 100

QUESTION: ARE THE NEWS ORGANIZATIONS YOU ARE MOST FAMILIAR WITH FAIR OR UNFAIR TO THE BUSH ADMINISTRATION?