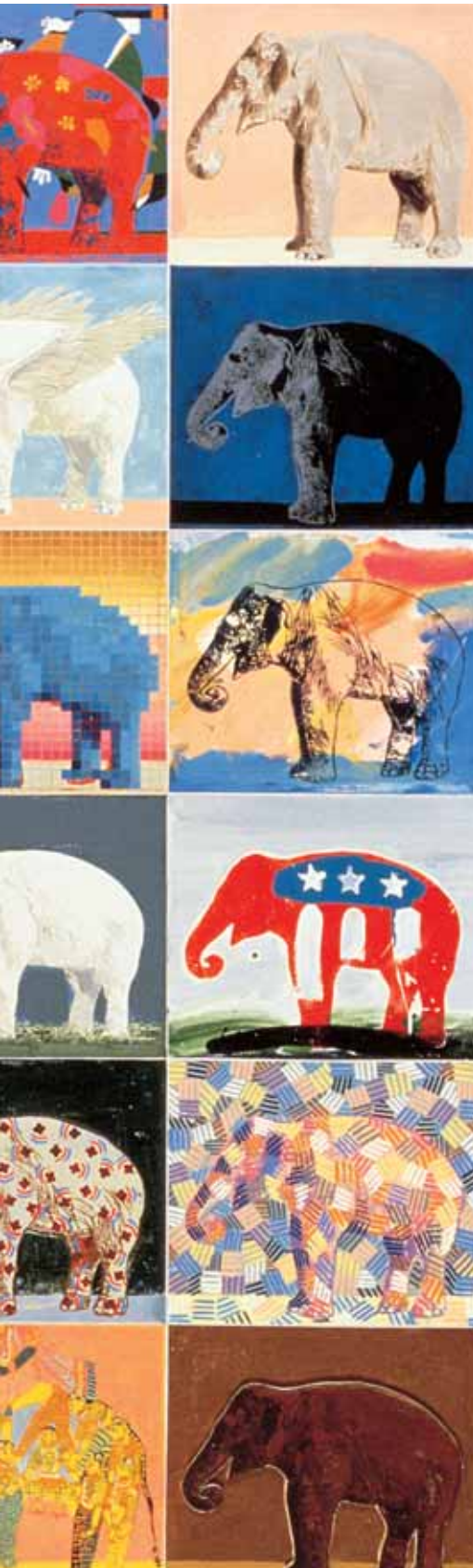
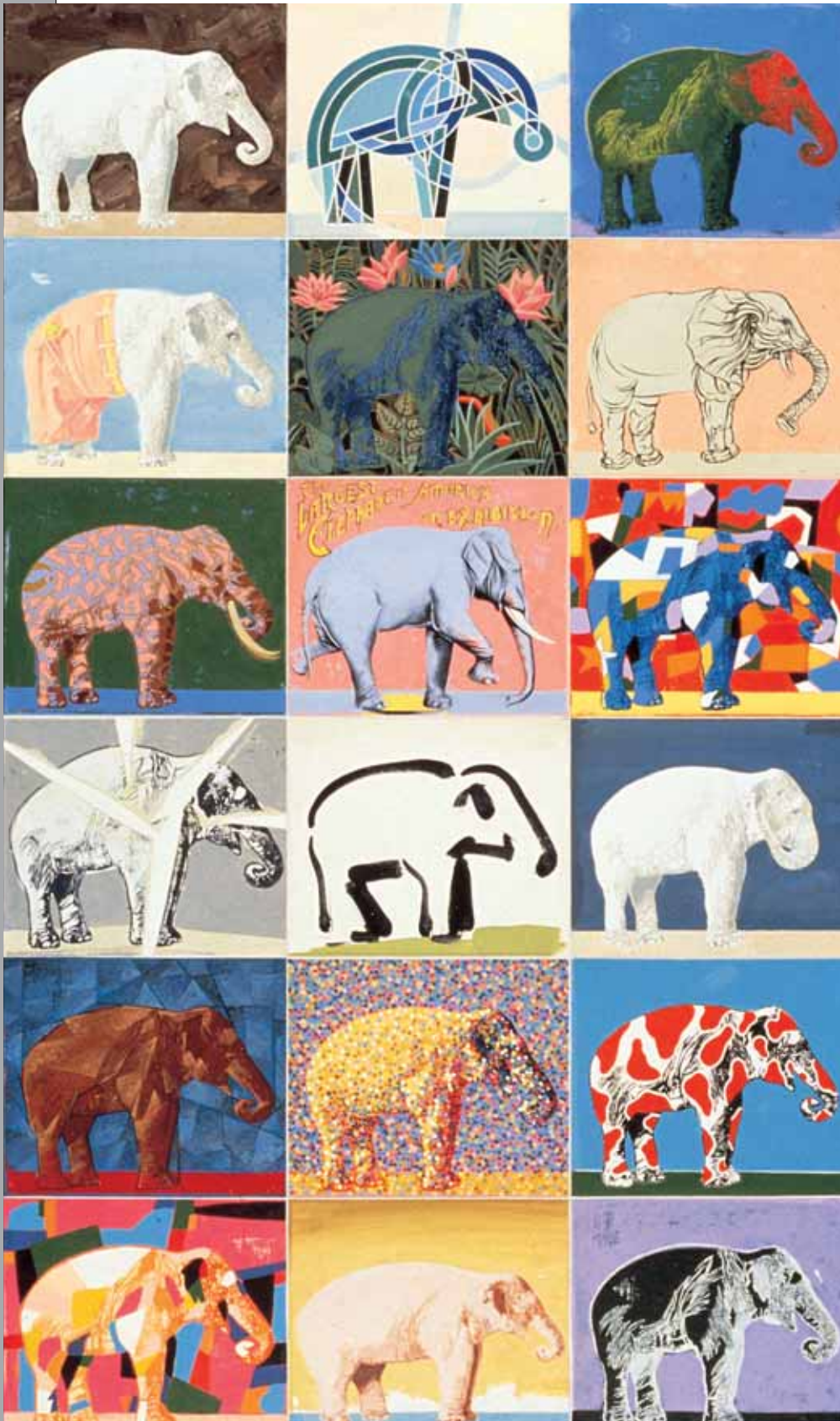


Does George W. Bush's High Popularity Mean Anything?

BACKGROUND: *It is all but universally agreed that the unusually high popularity ratings of George W. Bush to date stem from the post 9/11 war against terrorism. The President did not enjoy much of a political honeymoon in the classic sense, and the first nine months of his Administration were decidedly mixed until war broke out. Yet even several months after 9/11, when it became clear Osama Bin Laden had not yet been captured or killed, the President's poll ratings remained unexpectedly high. Even Enron-related problems so far have had little effect, although the jury is still out on whether Wall Street-related problems bring down the President's ratings.*

The real question is whether George W. Bush is merely lucky, in the right place at the right time, or whether he has transcended to some new level in the public's mind, with powerful long term political significance? Put another way, has the Bush popularity remained high simply because the American people historically rally around a leader in times of war, or is the popularity tied to Bush's handling of the war, specifically to his Texas-style penchant for wanting to "kick ass" against a feared opponent? Perhaps the real issue here comes down to the question of what makes an individual "presidential" in the national psyche? Has Bush achieved a destined level of presidential appropriateness in the public's mind, or would any President's poll ratings remain high under similar circumstances of long-term terrorist danger?





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His Popularity Is Deceptive

President Bush's apparent popularity is deceptive. The people are supporting the Office of the Presidency, rather than Bush personally, as they always do in time of crisis.

Bush is at the mercy of events. Further acts of domestic terrorism can be blamed on the President's failure to adequately protect the country, and Senate Democrats hold a veto process over Bush's domestic agenda.

Mr. Bush stands no better than a 50/50 chance of re-election.

Mr. Bush, who lost the popular vote in 2000, stands no better than a 50/50 chance of re-election.



JOHN SEARS

John Sears is the former campaign manager for Ronald Reagan.

The Big Drop's Coming



AL FROM

Al From is founder and chief executive officer of the Democratic Leadership Council.

President Bush's approval ratings have remained high because Americans appreciate his response to the September 11 terrorist attacks on our country and because they think he's a nice guy who could visit with them at their local coffee or barber shop.

But those ratings are likely to have little long-term political significance for three reasons:

First, they're already beginning to slip. Most recent polling has the President's approval ratings dropping into the 60 percent range for the first time since before September 11. In the New York Times/CBS NewsPoll, for example, his rating fell nine points during the last two weeks of July.

Second, the President's ratings are artificially inflated because of high levels of support from Democrats and independents. That support will almost certainly diminish as we move closer to the fall elections—and even if it doesn't, it certainly is not transferable to other Republicans.

Third, most Americans believe the country is headed in the wrong direction. That's the most important indicator of the President's

political condition. The latest New York Times Poll showed voters thinking that the country is headed in the wrong direction by 14 points. That's almost identical to attitudes in 1994, when President Clinton's Democratic Party lost control of Congress in a Republican

Most Americans believe the country is headed in the wrong direction.

landslide. Republicans cannot take much solace in that. Neither can they take comfort in the reality that more Americans believe the condition of the economy is bad than good by 53 to 45 percent. On election day 2000, 85 percent of Americans thought the condition of the economy was good.

Add to the above a depressed stock market and a rise in the crime rate for the first time in a decade and you have conditions for a precipitous drop in the President's approval ratings—when the perceptions catch up with reality.

His Popularity Is an Aberration

The public's evaluation of the job George W. Bush is doing as president changed dramatically as a result of the horrific attacks of September 11 and his response in leading the country on a campaign against terrorism. But presidential approval also became a surrogate measure of national unity and patriotism. How else could the measure jump 40 percentage points (from 51 percent to 91 percent) within 48 hours, before the President had done anything to be evaluated? The durability of this high level of job approval has been impressive but evidence is mounting that it is likely to prove evanescent. First, his job approval ratings have been trending down for many months, a trend that has accelerated in recent weeks as the war on terrorism has been supplanted in the public's mind by corporate scandals, stock market declines, and a growing sense of economic insecurity. While Republican voters have remained universally supportive of their President, Democrats and Independents are returning to a more naturally critical stance. By the November election, his ratings could easily drop below 60 percent. Second, the President's popularity has not translated into increased support for the Republican party or for the policies and approaches on domestic policy championed by the President. Third, the overall support for the President does not extend to specific dimensions of his job performance beyond national security. All of this suggests that while citizens became more comfortable with President Bush after September 11 and thought him to have the requisite leadership skills, they continue to harbor doubts about his priorities, loyalties, interests, and policies. His extraordinarily high popularity over the last ten months is likely to prove more an aberration than a pattern of his presidency.

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It's The Economy, Stupid!

Presidential popularity ratings, like presidential elections, always reflect the good sense inherent in the collective judgment of the electorate. In this instance, George W. Bush's high ratings are a result of 1) the rally-round-the-flag sentiment that always wells up at times of crisis; 2) the President's generally deft ability to give eloquent expression to that sentiment; and 3) his relative success so far in crafting military, foreign policy, and internal security responses to what is widely perceived as the most important issue of our time. As for the efforts by opponents to bring Bush down by attacking his corporate background and connection to business leaders, it won't work. The American political collective isn't swayed by matters of image or background or association. It is swayed by events and developments that matter. Thus, Bush's Harkin background is no more important to the electorate than Bill

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Clinton's habitual pursuit of women. Which brings us to the one issue that could wash away the September 11 pedestal upon which the President now stands—the economy. If the market

decline turns out to be a harbinger of bad economic times, Bush's poll ratings will plummet. But, then, if he begins to look hapless in the face of the terrorist threat, his poll ratings will also plummet, particularly if that threat begins to manifest itself in serious domestic disruption. In the meantime, the electorate has it about right: The country is in a tough situation that requires presidential leadership.

The President seems to be providing at least the fundamentals of that needed leadership; as long as he continues to do so he should be given the benefit of the doubt, but if he falters or screws up the economy, all bets are off. All this is a lot simpler than the pundits and partisans would have you believe—and also a lot more reassuring.



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Today's Approval Numbers Are Meaningless

Right now there is considerable doubt about where President Bush's job approval numbers will be by the time the November 5 midterm elections arrive and for that matter, whether this election—which will determine control of the U.S. Senate and House—will be played on a level playing field or one tilted in favor of Democrats. The President's approval rating had been gradually drifting down from stratospheric levels between September 11 and early this year, but took a big drop down in July, as the declining stock market and corporate corruption headlined several months of generally depressing news coverage that took its toll on public optimism and consumer confidence. In late spring, our view was

Declining "right direction" numbers measuring public feelings about the direction of the country suggest that history may yet again repeat itself.

that Republicans had a 60–70 percent chance of retaining control of the House and a 50–50 shot at winning back control of the Senate. Those odds were very much in question by late summer as the public became increasingly pessimistic about the direction of the country, and the chances of fallout for the party controlling the presidency and the House became very real. For the first time since September 11, much of the past year it appeared as if Republicans would have a great chance of avoiding the traditional midterm election losses for the party holding the White

House (32 out of 34 times since the end of the Civil War), but now their odds don't look so great. While we have yet to see real fallout for the Republican Party and in individual races around the country, the declining "right direction" numbers measuring public feelings about the direction of the country and presidential job approval ratings suggest that history may yet again repeat itself.

In terms of the President's 2004 re-election chances, polls today are completely irrelevant. History shows that there is no correlation between presidential job approval ratings during the first 34 months in office and whether that President was subsequently re-elected. In August of their second years as President,

Ronald Reagan had a 41 percent job approval rating yet went on to win re-election by a landslide. Bill Clinton had a 39 percent approval rating at this point, yet won comfortably. Jimmy Carter had a 43 percent rating, and yes, lost. George H.W. Bush had a 75 percent

approval rating at this stage, before the Persian Gulf War, and went on to lose re-election with the lowest percentage of any president since William Howard Taft in 1912. Only a president's performance and approval rating during the 12–14 months before the general election really matters. Our attention spans don't allow for consideration of any earlier perceptions.

He's Similar to Reagan

Each president deals with his own combination of problems. A few face large challenges, such as depression or war, while others wrestle with prosaic, less surprising issues. But the next time you hear someone imply that the size of a president's challenge is what gives him the chance to be a strong president, be very skeptical.

Theodore Roosevelt inherited strong economic growth and unprecedented foreign policy success from his predecessor, William McKinley. But few would question Roosevelt's status as a strong president. He took a strong hand and, because of who he was, made it stronger. The challenges facing Gerald Ford and Jimmy Carter in the mid-1970s era of Watergate, Vietnam defeat, and stagflation were arguably far greater, yet neither proved to be a strong president.

Bill Clinton was a mixed bag. When it was up to him to set an agenda, he let legislative elites take the lead—the liberal Democrats in 1993–94 and conservative Republicans afterward. The American people rated him a stronger president when he was forced into the role of counterpuncher in 1995–2000. Though he made some excellent decisions (signing welfare reform in 1996 and the budget package/tax cut of 1997), he was never strong enough to dominate the national agenda.

The truth is that even before the outbreak of the war on terror a year ago,

George W. Bush showed signs of being a strong president. His pushing through of a surprisingly large tax cut, in particular, showed strength, regardless of the merits of the legislation. Yes, his conduct of the war is the reason he shot up in popularity, as most presidents do when a crisis breaks out. But the “rally effect” does not explain why his approval rating has remained so high, despite continual predictions that it is starting to fade.

I think Bush will prove to be a strong president because he makes clear decisions and sticks to them, he is selective about the issues to which he commits his full prestige, and because he listens to a wide range of advisers, yet keeps his own counsel and often retains the element of surprise.

Even more important, he is similar to Ronald Reagan in his willingness to speak unapologetically of right and wrong, and to appeal to the American people's sense of right and wrong to sustain his policies. Like Reagan, he puts the opinion of media and political elites a distant second to his ability to achieve morality-based policy approval from voters. This has been the pattern of the strong, memorable presidencies throughout American history. ♦

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JEFF BELL

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