

Policy and Politics by the Numbers; For the President, Polls Became a Defining Force in His Administration

[FINAL Edition]

The Washington Post - Washington, D.C.

Subjects: Series & special reports; Public opinion surveys; Policy making; Presidency

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Date: Dec 31, 2000

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One night a week, a select group of White House aides and Cabinet members would file into the Yellow Oval Room in the White House residence. And Bill Clinton, the most polished and talkative politician of his era, for once would let someone else do the talking: a disheveled man who even friends say was ill at ease except when the conversation turned to numbers.

The man was Clinton's pollster. The weekly residence meeting was the place where this president got his fix of the data that drove a presidency.

As Clinton prepares to leave office 20 days from now, even his sharpest critics bow to his mastery of politics. This was a president who understood his times and became the dominant voice of them, who faced every conceivable adversity yet managed still to survive and prosper. What is less understood is that Clinton's political gifts were more than the magic of personality. They were a set of precise techniques that relied on constant gauging of public opinion, and constant responses to it in ways large and small.

So Clinton's legacy is in many ways a story about polls. It is not true, as some critics say, that Clinton always did what pollster Mark J. Penn's numbers told him to do. It is true that no previous president read public opinion surveys with the same hypnotic intensity. And no predecessor has integrated his pollster so thoroughly into the policymaking operation of his White House.

It was with the critical assistance of polls--literally hundreds of them, taken daily during campaigns and other critical moments, and at least once a week all through the second term--that Clinton refined the centrist "new Democrat" language and policies that are one of his distinctive political contributions.

Most of all, according to a variety of aides who worked closely with this president, polls were the essential device in helping Clinton survive and govern in a hostile Washington climate that for at least two-thirds of his tenure required him to fight to preserve his influence. His two terms encompassed the days of the Republican congressional takeover in 1995 and 1996, the impeachment ordeal of 1998 and even this year, when the natural cycles of politics would tend to rob a lame-duck president of policymaking clout.

Perhaps no episode illustrated the merger of polling and policy as vividly as one that began unfolding in the fall of 1997. After five years in which Clinton had seen much of his domestic agenda stymied by the need to fight the budget deficit, his White House was facing a welcome new challenge: a surplus.

Clinton's economic and domestic policy teams huddled busily for months to discuss how to use the new money--and to devise a strategy to prevent Republicans from spending it on a tax cut. On Nov. 19, 1997, the decision essentially got made. At the weekly meeting that night, Penn presented what--measured by the hundreds of billions of dollars that would be affected--counts as one of the most influential polls ever. The survey, which he completed just an hour before the meeting began, showed that voters preferred devoting the surplus to Social Security over a tax cut by 82 percent to 16 percent.

It was a margin that astonished Clinton, participants recalled. But the polls also showed voters overwhelmingly favored Social Security over such options as creating a new "educational trust fund," or other spending plans White House policy aides had been considering.

Two months later, just days after a sex scandal had exploded on him, Clinton delivered a State of the Union message imploring Congress to "save Social Security first." That echoing phrase helped him regain his political footing, and put Republicans permanently on the defensive in the most important fiscal policy debate of recent years.

Other examples, while less dramatic, are more revealing of the day-in, day-out way in that polling merged with policy and message in this White House.

In late 1998, Penn's numbers showed issues relating to privacy were suddenly zooming off the charts. The pollster, meeting with such top officials as Treasury Secretary Lawrence H. Summers, agitated to push proposals protecting medical and financial records to a prominent place on the administration's agenda.

But an administration plan in 1997 to curb AIDS by allowing needle exchanges for drug addicts was canceled an hour before it was to be announced; consultants said polling showed it could backfire badly with the public. Clinton's own health appointees were enraged.

Seeking Out Swing Voters

If polling was the lifeblood of this administration, then its heart was in the most unlikely location: an office in Denver, where Penn's firm runs a phone-bank operation in the shadow of the Rockies. Following the time zones from East Coast to West, about 125 employees each night make calls to households chosen randomly by computer.

About 60 percent of those who answer tell Penn's callers to buzz off. Those who stay on the line spend an average of 30 minutes answering about 80 questions that go into what one Cabinet member called "amazing detail" about political personalities, policy proposals and events in the news.

The 800 or so people in any given poll are never told their answers are going directly to the president. Above all, the polls are used to divine the thinking of "swing voters," those independents wary of traditional big-government liberalism whose views are pivotal in any election or big policy debate.

Defending his influence in this administration, Penn in an interview described polling as a facilitator of democracy. "Swing voters are the least likely people to be involved in the political system, except on Election Day, when they are the most important people," he said. "Polling gives voice to their thoughts and feelings and attitudes all year long. I always thought it is a benefit that leadership gets to look at this when making decisions."

He said his techniques do not cynically drain politics of meaning, as some critics maintain, but emphasize substance. Clinton survived impeachment, he said, by concentrating on issues important to people. (On his wall is a framed copy of this newspaper on the day Clinton was acquitted. "Thanks," Clinton wrote on the page.)

But the unparalleled use of modern polling techniques during the Clinton years also raised questions about the nature of leadership that are as old as democracy. What is the balance between following public opinion and trying to educate and lead it? Two once-close Clinton aides, former senior adviser George Stephanopoulos and former labor secretary Robert Reich, wrote memoirs after leaving the administration that recalled bitterly Clinton's reliance on consultants and polling. This contempt for Clinton's data-driven brand of politics is widely, though privately, shared even by many people who still work for him.

"He institutionalized the notion that the presidency is about policy and polls, and this very mechanical notion that if you talk about something that is popular than you will be popular and that's all that matters," a former senior White House aide said. "It drained the majesty out of the presidency. In some ways that was what saved Clinton, but it came at some cost."

A Lesson Learned

To say that Clinton was the most poll-conscious president is emphatically not to say that he always chose policies based on narrow political advantage. The U.S. interventions he ordered to halt "ethnic cleansing" in the Balkans, or a Mexican currency meltdown in 1995, were in direct defiance of polls. His foremost legislative accomplishment this year, giving permanent favored trade status to China, was won in the face of tepid support from the public and heated opposition from organized labor.

Yet these departures from majority sentiment were made gingerly-- and were clear exceptions to his agenda. After the Republicans humiliated Democrats in the midterm elections in 1994, current and former advisers said, Clinton resolved that he would never again become so estranged from public opinion or allow his agenda to be captured by more liberal elements of his party.

The change gave a central role to Penn and partner Doug Schoen, two high school and college classmates from New York who Clinton did not even know before 1995. Penn moved to Washington to become Clinton's most important political adviser in the second term.

A man of rumpled suits and fly-away hair, who once attended a meeting with Clinton wearing mismatched shoes, Penn is virtually unknown to the public beyond the White House. Inside it, his self-assured opinions and dismissive stance toward dissenters made him a disliked figure among many colleagues. Detractors gave him a derisive nickname: "Shlumbo."

Even as he became a pivotal player in government, Penn remained outside it. His firm was paid \$2.5 million for White House polls by the Democratic National Committee since the start of last year, according to disclosure records. But the firm makes most of its money--enough to make him a wealthy man at age 46--polling for businesses.

Among his most important private clients is Microsoft Corp. This contract has given him a unique vantage point: an adviser to the preeminent innovator of the past decade in the realm of politics, Bill Clinton, and the preeminent innovator in the realm of business and technology, Bill Gates.

Taking On a New Role

The role that Clinton gave to Penn was a historic innovation, a new model of governance in the White House. All presidents since Franklin D. Roosevelt have used pollsters. And Clinton began his tenure using polling in a more or less conventional way. He polled to measure his approval rating, to see the reaction to important speeches, to discern broad currents of public opinion.

But, beginning in 1995, Clinton began using polls in a far more extensive way--and to hear Penn and his White House supporters tell it, a more creative way. Consultants were used not merely to help gauge and manage opinion but to

help sharpen and in several cases initiate policy proposals. Penn and Schoen, brought into the White House under the sponsorship of consultant Dick Morris, began surveying the public about policies in much more detail than had been done earlier in Clinton's term.

What does the public think about requiring televisions to have "V-chips" to let parents block out questionable programming? What about giving the Food and Drug Administration authority to regulate tobacco? Would people support new subsidies for college tuition? If so, would they rather get help by direct aid or a tax deduction? All are instances in which Morris and the pollsters were the force in driving policy items onto Clinton's agenda.

Many of the words that sprang from Clinton's mouth were also the product of polling. Any American who follows politics knew from 1996 on that Clinton and Vice President Gore thought Republicans' plan to cut taxes was a "risky tax scheme." The phrase, Penn recalled, was the result of repeated refining through poll questions.

People responded with greater hostility to otherwise appealing tax cuts if they thought it put the broader economy at risk. Calling it a scheme highlighted the notion that not every income level would benefit equally.

Likewise, a White House economic aide recalled, polling data showed how to sell programs for the poor. It turned out that emphasizing children, which the administration had thought was a winner, sounded to many voters like traditional, and unpopular, welfare. So Clinton began emphasizing his plans for "working families."

Clinton bristles at the idea he is driven by polls. At a reception honoring Penn for his wedding last year, Clinton emphasized that he uses polls to help determine the best arguments for policies.

That is certainly part of it. But it is irrefutably true that polling often refines not merely the sales pitch, but the actual substance of Clinton's agenda--what gets on it and what stays off.

For most of the second term, Penn met weekly with Clinton's top domestic policy adviser, Bruce Reed, and White House senior adviser Thomas Freedman, to review policy ideas. Among the most important steps for an aide in the White House or at a Cabinet agency trying to push a proposal is to get it included in one of Penn's weekly polls.

While Penn rejects the notion that he is attracted only to small policies, he makes no apologies for modest programs. The public registers overwhelming support for putting heart defibrillators in airplanes and other public places, goals Clinton promoted through executive orders and legislation. "That's not small if you're one of the 9 million people with heart disease," Penn said.

Sometimes polling has squashed ideas that Clinton's team thought might be popular. When White House aides were looking at new proposals to make parents accountable for crimes committed by juvenile children, they backed off when polling showed people thought this went too far.

Clinton, several aides said, can read a poll with a technical skill that rivals his pollster's. Clinton is a politician for whom polls fill important intellectual and emotional needs, many close associates believe. Harold Ickes, Clinton's first-term deputy chief of staff, recalled watching Clinton listen to polling data at weekly residence meetings as if in a trance.

Back then, the polling was presented by Morris, who would soon be removed from Clinton's team in a sex scandal. "I have never seen such a role reversal," Ickes said. "Bill Clinton dominates every other conversation I have witnessed, including with other heads of state. But with Morris it was almost as if he had some supernatural hold on him. He would sit for 30 minutes, not saying a word."

Morris, who worked with Clinton from his early days as Arkansas governor, described in his book Clinton's draw to polling: "In a room he will instinctively, as if by canine sense of smell, find anyone who shows reserve toward him, and he will work full time on winning his approval and affection. . . . America is the ultimate room for Clinton. For him a poll helps him sense who doesn't like him and why they don't. In the reflected numbers he sees his shortcomings and his potential, his successes and failures."

Meaning in Numbers Penn, too, finds deeper meaning in numbers. He began polling while at Harvard University, quizzing students on such issues as favored residence halls. A man with little of the casual bonhomie of the politicians he worked for, Penn recalls an early epiphany about polling: "You could find out what people thought without talking to them."

Soon after graduation, he and Schoen started their business. Then- New York Mayor Edward I. Koch was an early client. But the duo had increasingly drifted toward business, not politics, when they were brought on to Clinton's team.

Clinton had fired his early pollster, Stanley Greenberg. Four current and former Clinton aides say the president told them he preferred his new pollsters because they did not merely diagnose problems--they "tell me what to do."

Greenberg did not return a telephone message seeking comment. But the contrasts between his and Penn's polling techniques and political philosophies echoed in the 2000 campaign--an argument certain to continue into the next political cycle.

Do Democrats win with an upbeat message that celebrates how government can expand opportunities for upwardly mobile suburbanites? This is Penn's gospel. Or should they aim a few notches down the ladder, with a message

aimed at the grievances of the lower middle class, which is socially conservative but economically stressed? This is the Greenberg formula.

The debate roiled the campaign of the vice president--for a time a client of Penn's. But, at a meeting in Gore's official residence in September 1999, the two exchanged sharp words on whether "Clinton fatigue" would be a major factor in the 2000 elections. Penn insisted the answer was no; Gore devoutly believed it was yes. He fired Penn a few days later. Greenberg became a key adviser to Gore.

Greenberg's devotees believe Gore found his natural voice as a candidate only when he abandoned the tepid brand of politics Penn espoused. Schoen said if Gore had followed his partner's centrist strategy, "I'm very confident he would be president-elect today."

There was another candidate in 2000 who had been advised by important Democratic lobbyists and strategists to fire Penn but chose not to: Hillary Rodham Clinton.

Penn's role in her New York Senate campaign ruffled as many feathers as his White House work. All through 2000, an argument brewed between Clinton's consultants in Washington--an uneasy alliance of Penn and media consultant Mandy Grunwald--and her campaign staff in New York. The New Yorkers wanted her to spend more time promoting her biography and addressing voters' doubts about her personality; Penn insisted that she talk almost exclusively about issues. Things got so bad, campaign aides said, that last summer the candidate angrily summoned both sides to the White House to order an end to feuding.

In the end, Hillary Clinton's 55 percent victory left Penn vindicated. Late in Clinton's term, even officials in the White House who once scorned the Morris-Penn model of politics have become reconciled to it. White House Chief of Staff John Podesta said he has "become much more of a devotee." One White House aide recalled that Treasury Secretary Summers, at a recent meeting, asked: "What's the data say?"

Ultimately, Penn succeeded because his notion of politics meshed perfectly with that of the president who was his patron.

"I believe strongly in Democratic activism if you do it the right way," Penn said. "The right way is one that gets results through consensus. The wrong way is one that seeks to divide the country and that seems to be a return to big government."

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