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Perot gives Bush push at home

Texas gain is exception to Clinton trend

by Ralph Z. Hallow; THE WASHINGTON TIMES

Since Ross Perot's entry into the election contest last week, President Bush pulled ahead of Bill Clinton by 5 points in Texas, according to the latest Washington Times/Mason-Dixon poll. Texas, with its 32 electoral votes, is a matter of deep concern to Bush strategists since Mr. Clinton led the president by a single percentage point in the Texas survey taken in August by the same poll.

"Psychologically, it [Mr. Bush's lead] is extraordinarily important because it is the first major sign of movement by Bush in this race," said GOP media consultant Brad O'Leary, who publishes the O'Leary/Kamber Newsletter. Most analysts had considered the state, which both Mr. Bush and Mr. Perot call home, as the one where Mr. Perot's entry could take enough votes from Mr. Bush to ensure a Clinton victory.

"Obviously, Perot has not helped Clinton in Texas but has helped Bush - slightly," said Mason-Dixon President Brad Coker. Mr. Bush is generally believed to need both Texas and Florida to win. In Florida, he holds a 6-point lead over Mr. Clinton, 42-36, according to the Washington Times/Mason-Dixon poll conducted Sept. 10-12, enough to put Florida in the "leaning Bush" but not "likely Bush" column, Mr. Coker said. The Texas poll showed Mr. Bush ahead

of Mr. Clinton, 40-35 percent. Mr. Perot had 14 percent, and 11 percent were undecided. The survey was conducted Saturday through Monday. Its error margin is plus or minus 3.5 percent. The president, however, shows signs of backsliding in other key states. Recent updates of the Washington Times/Mason-Dixon Electoral College poll indicate Mr. Clinton has widened his lead significantly, for example, in California and Maryland since Mr. Perot declared.

Overall, the Washington Times/Mason-Dixon poll shows Mr. Clinton has a strong enough lead in 25 states to claim 302 electors. This is 32 more than the 270 needed to win the electoral college, if the election were held today.

In most of the states, Mr. Bush also is losing on another front: the favorable-unfavorable ratings among likely voters. A nationwide tracking poll by the Tarrance Group reports Mr. Clinton's favorables at 49 percent and Mr. Bush's at 40. Mr. Clinton's unfavorables register 39, compared with 52 for Mr. Bush. Here again, the Lone Star State is an exception. "Texas is that rare example where Bush has higher favorables than Mr. Clinton and a lower unfavorable rating among voters and where Mr. Clinton has the opposite," said Mr. Coker.

In the Washington Times/Mason-Dixon Texas poll, 45 percent of respondents rated Mr. Bush favorably and 34 percent unfavorably, compared with Mr. Clinton's 36 favorable and 40 unfavorable.

More typical, however, is North Carolina, where the president's favorable-unfavorable rating is 37-39 and where Mr. Clinton's is 46-35 in the recent polling update, said Mr. Coker. In a Maryland update, the Washington Times/Mason-Dixon poll shows Mr. Bush with 31 percent favorable name recognition compared with 44 percent for Mr. Clinton. Unfavorables: 51 percent for Mr. Bush, 32 percent for Mr. Clinton.

The poll gave 50 percent of the state's likely vote to Mr. Clinton, 34 percent to Mr. Bush and 6 percent to Mr. Perot. This is the same as last month's numbers in the Washington Times/Mason-Dixon poll.

When Mr. Perot was riding high in June, the poll showed him with 28 percent of Maryland's likely vote, a point behind Mr. Bush and a point ahead of Mr. Clinton.

Mr. Coker, like other pollsters, believes Mr. Bush has yet to stick with a single theme long enough to move the numbers favorably, whether it is advancing his economic vision or criticism of Mr. Clinton.

"The Bush people mount an attack, like the one on taxes and spending, and then wander away from it," said Democratic pollster Bob Shrum. "It has every

campaign professional in both parties mystified."

National polls this week show Mr. Bush higher than Mr. Clinton in such areas as trust, strong leadership, honesty and experience but lower on family values, race relations and ability to deal with crime.

"Clinton is doing most things right," Mr. Coker said. "He is recognizing that Bush's electoral base is very weak. He has a reasonable chance of picking off five or six states you would normally consider impossible for a Democrat to get: Florida, Texas, Idaho, North and South Dakota, Arizona and Nevada." By forcing Mr. Bush to spend time in some of these states, he keeps the president from campaigning in the industrial Midwest, "where the election is really going to be decided."

Mr. Coker and Mr. Shrum find it strange that the Bush campaign has done little on the question of whether Mr. Clinton avoided the draft and didn't tell the truth about it afterward.

"They [the Bush campaign] toy with it but let it lapse," Mr. Coker said, suggesting that the re-election campaign take a hint from Desert Storm hero Gen. H. Norman Schwarzkopf.

"I heard him tell Barbara Walters that he doubted Mr. Clinton was qualified because, if he became commander in chief and had to institute a draft in a national emergency, young people would say, 'Why should I go, if you didn't go when you were called?'"