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## Bush's High Approval Ratings Among Most Sustained for Presidents

Only Johnson sustained his high point longer than Bush

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### GALLUP NEWS SERVICE

PRINCETON, NJ -- One of the most dramatic outcomes of the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks has been the public's increased support for the government and its leaders. This is most vividly demonstrated in George W. Bush's presidential approval ratings, which have been in the high 80s for the last six weeks, including a record 90% in a Sept. 21-22 CNN/USA Today/Gallup poll. An analysis of past presidential high points shows that these ratings usually show some drop-off shortly after the peak, and more sustained decay over time, which makes Bush's current pattern of sustained high ratings remarkable by comparison.

### High Points Show Initial Decline Within Weeks

An analysis of presidents' high approval ratings over the past 50 years underscores how difficult they are to sustain for any appreciable amount of time. Drops of as little as five percentage points usually happen shortly after the approval peak. Prior to Bush, only one president, Lyndon Johnson, was able to keep his approval rating within five points of his highest score for more than a month. In fact, seven of the last eight presidents saw their high mark decline by five points or more the very next time Gallup measured their approval rating (with the longest gap between polls just four weeks).

The following table shows the time elapsed between the president's high point and the first poll showing a drop of five percentage points, which is a large enough movement to represent a real change in presidential approval.

#### Presidential High Points and Time Elapsed Until a Five-Point Drop in Approval Ratings

President	Score	Date of High Score	Score	5-point Drop	
				Number of Weeks	Number of Polls
Eisenhower	79	1956 Dec 14-19	73	4	1
Kennedy	83	1961 Apr 28-May 3	77	1	1
Johnson	79	1964 Feb 28-Mar 4	74	7	5
Nixon	67	1969 Nov 12-17	59	4	1
Ford	71	1974 Aug 16-19	66	3	1
Carter	75	1977 May 18-21	67	2	2

Reagan	68	1981 May 8-11	59	4	1
Reagan	68	1986 May 16-19	61	3	1
Bush	89	1991 Feb 28-Mar 3	84	3	3
Clinton	73	1998 Dec 19-20	67	2	1
Bush	90	2001 Sep 21-22	N/A	7	4

Johnson's approval rating remained in the high 70s for seven weeks, and five polls, before falling to 74% in May 1964. Bush has matched that mark. The new CNN/USA Today/Gallup poll conducted Nov. 2-4 shows Bush's approval rating at 87% seven weeks after his high point.

The elder George Bush's previous record-high approval rating of 89% was more or less sustained for three weeks in March 1991 before falling back to 84%, which in his case represented the beginning of a sustained decline into the 30s. The only other 80%-plus rating among these presidents -- Kennedy's 83% in April and May 1961, shortly after the Bay of Pigs invasion of Cuba -- lasted less than one week, as it was down to 77% by the end of the first week of May.

#### **After Initial Decline, High Levels Can Be Sustained**

While most presidents showed rather immediate declines in their highest approval ratings, further decline is not always so fast. Half of the presidents since Eisenhower have been able to stay within 10 points of their high for more than two months. Carter showed the most rapid descent -- his 1977 high of 75% dropped to 63% only four weeks later. Ford's 71% rating, attained immediately after he took office, quickly fell to 50% once he announced the pardon of Richard Nixon. The elder George Bush's 89% rating fell to 77% just six weeks after the Persian Gulf War.

On the other hand, not until mid-December 1964 did Gallup record a 10-point decline from Johnson's 79% reading, measured in a poll conducted in late February and early March of that year. Reagan's second 68% reading (matching an earlier rating of 68% he had in 1981) endured for 29 weeks in 1986 before news of the Iran-Contra scandal sent his job approval below 50%. The 73% score Bill Clinton received following the House's vote to impeach him in December 1998 did not fall 10 points until March of the following year.

#### **Presidential High Points and Time Elapsed until a Ten-Point Drop in Approval Ratings**

President	Score	Date of High Score	Score	10-point drop	
				Number of Weeks	Number of polls
Eisenhower	79	1956 Dec 14-19	65	13	4
Kennedy	83	1961 Apr 28-May 3	72	7	4

Johnson	79	1964 Feb 28-Mar 4	69	40	10
Nixon	67	1969 Nov 12-17	56	14	5
Ford	71	1974 Aug 16-19	50	5	2
Carter	75	1977 May 18-21	63	4	3
Reagan	68	1981 May 8-11	58	7	3
Reagan	68	1986 May 16-19	47	29	8
Bush	89	1991 Feb 28-Mar 3	77	6	12
Clinton	73	1998 Dec 19-20	62	11	12

The elapsed time for a larger drop of 15 points also shows a varied pattern, with Ford and the elder Bush declining the fastest. Of course, a drop of 15 points for George H.W. Bush -- given his extraordinarily high starting point -- meant that he still had a strong 74% approval rating. Kennedy, Johnson, and Nixon were able to keep their ratings within 14 points of their high scores for the better part of a year, although in Nixon's case his high rating was only 67%.

**Presidential High Points and Time  
Elapsed Until a Fifteen-Point Drop in Approval Ratings**

President	Score	Date	Score	15-point drop	
				Number of Weeks	Number of polls
Eisenhower	79	1956 Dec 14-19	64	16	6
Kennedy	83	1961 Apr 28-May 3	66	63	18
Johnson	79	1964 Feb 28-Mar 4	64	59	17
Nixon	67	1969 Nov 12-17	51	43	16
Ford	71	1974 Aug 16-19	50	5	2
Carter	75	1977 May 18-21	60	18	11
Reagan	68	1981 May 8-11	52	14	8
Reagan	68	1986 May 16-19	47	29	8

Bush	89	1991 Feb 28-Mar 3	74	8	8
Clinton	73	1998 Dec 19-20	53	20	20

### **High Bush Ratings Depend on Continued Support From Democrats and Independents**

History shows that Bush's exceptionally high approval ratings will eventually fall, but the fact that he has been able to maintain this high level for the past six weeks is remarkable. Bush's approval rating will remain high as long as Democrats and independents continue to support him in large numbers; Republicans have strongly supported him since he took office. Comparing the last pre-Sept. 11 poll, conducted Sept. 7-10, to the most recent poll of Nov. 2-4, Republican support for Bush climbed just 12 points, from 87% to 99%. Among independents approval rose 39 points (from 44% to 83%) and approval among Democrats increased 51 points (from 27% to 78%).

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