

The Battleground 2002 Poll

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Republican Strategic Analysis

By Ed Goeas

Fully nine months after the tragic events of September 11th, President George W. Bush continues to garner historically high approval ratings from the American public and is using that approval to sway voters in key elections across the country. Meanwhile, less than five months until the mid-term elections, Tom Daschle and the National Democrats are still looking for a way to drive a wedge between Presidential popularity and generic Republican support.

For virtually everyone watching the political landscape this year, there are three recurring questions that surface in any discussion about this year's elections; 1) Who has the upper hand going into the final stretch of the 2002 mid-term elections? 2) What impact will President Bush have on the November Elections? 3) Who will control the House and Senate going into 2004? While five months can be a lifetime in a political campaign season, this latest Battleground 2002 survey has taken a close look at the political environment and those factors that are at play as we enter the final phase of the 2002 elections.

There are two factors that traditionally play a large role in the eventual outcome of the mid-term elections. The first factor is there is usually lower intensity among voters of the party in control of the White House. Voters' traditional support of divided government comes into play in mid-term elections. However, the high approval rankings of President George W. Bush and the incumbent environment of the post September 11th period appears to have – at this point in the election – neutralized this normal trend of the electorate. In fact, Republican voters have a slight edge in intensity over Democratic voters at this point, and there are no signs on the horizon that George W. Bush will be a drag on that intensity. The second factor is that senior voters comprise a larger portion of the voters who vote in mid-term elections; and, here again, Republicans have a slight edge over the Democrats on the generic ballot with senior voters.

While many political observers readily admit that they are not quite sure how to factor in the impact of September 11th, one has to admit that there may be different factors at play in this very unusual political environment. Will the pre-retirement voters, with whom the Democrats are performing better, turn out in margins comparable to senior voters? Will Democrats be able to separate Congressional Republicans from their popular President and blame them for a more radical legislative agenda and inaction in addressing the concerns of the American public? Will the trends of the last three elections continue – with minority and union voters turning out at

higher levels than white conservative Christians? These points are certainly a large part of the Democrats' strategy that has been articulated by many of their leaders as well as their political operatives. In review of the Battleground 2002 data, these points have some potential; and the door is slightly ajar for the Democrats' strategic maneuvering. The question is whether the Republicans will be able to slam that door shut before the November elections!

The Political Environment – Who has the Advantage?

History would tell us that the party in control of the White House would be at a disadvantage going into the 2002 Elections, but a lot will depend on the issue matrix of voters' concerns in the Fall, and each party's ability to address those concerns to their advantage. Currently, Republicans enjoy an advantage of five percentage points when voters are asked which party can do a better job of handling the issue that most concerns them individually.

Twenty-seven percent (27%) of voters across the nation continue to be focused on pocketbook issues – like the economy, jobs and taxes. While one in four voters are concerned about the economy, they do appear to have shaken the “recession mentality” that plagued the nation in the middle of both Ronald Reagan and George Bush Senior's first term in office. It must be noted, however, that voters' enthusiasm towards the economy, while not negative, remains very cautious. In fact, with all three economic measurements, a majority of voters fall into what should be, at best, considered a “wait and see” position. A full majority (50%) believes the current economy is “just fair,” fifty-eight percent (58%) say the economy is the same as it was a year ago, and fifty-five percent (55%) feel the economy will be the same this time next year. The only bright note is that by a four to one margin (33% to 8%), voters feel that their family's economic position will be better one year from now.

While voters' concern over the economy continues to be expected, the biggest surprise in this most recent Battleground survey was in the area of terrorism. While September 11th and the war on terrorism has played a large part in defining the presidency of George W. Bush, and both the President and Republicans have a huge lead over Democrats in handling the war on terrorism and national defense, concern over terrorism had been put on the back burner of voters' issue concerns over recent months and have been considered by many analysts to be quickly becoming non-factors in the midterm elections. Coming in the wake of renewed reports of a “dirty bomb,” however, the threat of terrorism/national defense popped from the low single digits to twenty-three percent (23%) in a matter of days! The significance of this jump in voters' concern about terrorism is the sensitivity to terrorism that was displayed, raising the question of what impact the anniversary of September 11th will have on the ebb and flow of this Fall's campaign.

As the political campaigns kick into high gear in September, it will be important to watch the issue matrix. The first anniversary of September 11th will coincide with the U.S. Congress working on final approval of the federal budget. It will be interesting to see whether the media and the public focus their attention on remembrance and a renewed commitment to fighting terrorism, which should certainly benefit the Republicans, or will the equally important fights surrounding the federal budget find its way onto the headlines and help the Democrats frame their “class warfare” attacks in voters’ minds?

As stated earlier, Republicans enjoy an advantage of five percentage points when voters are asked which party can do a better job of handling the issue that most concerns them. Republicans can maintain an advantage over Democrats so long as the nation’s issue focus stays close to where it is today. If the Republicans in Congress allow the Democrats to set the agenda, then Republicans lose. This reinforces the notion that Congressional Republicans should continue to let the President set the agenda and take the lead, reinforcing his focus on the economy, education, and federal budget priorities. This has worked well for Republicans in Congress to this point in the election cycle. While both Republicans and Democrats in Congress continue to receive positive rankings on their job approvals, Republicans once again have a slight edge. In fact, fifty-four percent (54%) of voters approve of the job Republicans in Congress are doing, and thirty percent (30%) disapprove, while fifty-one percent (51%) of voters approve of the job Democrats in Congress are doing and thirty-four percent (34%) disapprove.

The ability of George W. Bush to focus his presidency on the economy has also helped the public’s overall perception of Republicans and their ability to handle economic issues over the Democrats – even in an unstable economic environment. This is illustrated by the fact that Republicans continue to rate better than Democrats on handling most economic measurements. The fact that President Bush has a net thirty-eight percent (+38%) positive rating on handling the economy (65% approve/27% disapprove), while the Democrats in Congress have a slim five percent approval rating (40% approve/35% disapprove) on the economy lends a great deal of credibility to Republican candidates across the board. Voters also have more confidence in Republicans to keep improving the economy driven by George W. Bush having an 11-point lead on that measurement over Democrats in Congress.

Several general forces are struggling among the electorate in these elections: the traditional loss of seats in Congress by the party controlling the White House, pro-incumbent effects post 9/11, the outcomes of the redistricting processes in each of the states, as well as the slowly recovering national economy, among others. One of the big questions is can President Bush’s sky-high job approval and phenomenal personal favorability overcome these other forces and provide Republican candidates with a generically positive environment going into the elections. The answer to this question appears to be yes!

George W. Bush's Impact in the Mid-Term Elections

George W. Bush is not only seen as doing a good job in the office of the Presidency, but voters like him at a very personal level. Seventy-four percent (74%) approve of the job he is doing as President (51% strongly), seventy-five percent (75%) hold a favorable impression of him, and seventy-eight percent (78%) approve of him as a person (54% strongly). Perhaps this is why Democrats appear to be moving to a strategy of separating Bush from the Congressional Republicans. While a majority (56%) say they like divided government, when voters are asked if they want members of Congress that support Bush, act independently of Bush, or if it is not a factor in their vote, voters are more evenly split -- 34% support Bush, 31% act independently of Bush, and 32% say it is of no particular importance.

There is a warning sign for Republicans in this data that would suggest Republicans not allow Democrats to drive a wedge between the President's image and that of Congressional Republicans! In each of the fourteen issue handling measurements and five values measurements Bush is stronger than the Republican Party is as a whole in contrast to the Democratic Party – by more than double digits in some cases.

Issue Confidence- Bush V. Democrats in Congress, Republicans V. Democrats

	<u>PRES</u>	<u>DEM</u>	<u>NET</u>	<u>GOP</u>	<u>DEM</u>	<u>NET</u>	<u>BUSH ADV</u>
	<u>GWB</u>	<u>CONG</u>	<u>DIFF</u>	<u>PARTY</u>	<u>PARTY</u>	<u>DIFF</u>	<u>(BUSH - GOP)</u>
Safeguarding against terrorist	69%	16%	+53	54%	19%	+35	+18
Handling foreign affairs	67%	24%	+43	53%	31%	+22	+21
Holding the line on taxes	58%	31%	+27	54%	29%	+25	+2
Cutting government waste	51%	28%	+23	45%	29%	+16	+7
Sharing your values	53%	34%	+19	42%	40%	+2	+17
Keeping America prosperous	53%	36%	+17	44%	35%	+9	+8
Keep improving the economy	49%	38%	+11	41%	39%	+2	+9
Improving education	47%	38%	+9	38%	41%	-3	+12
Balancing the federal budget	44%	40%	+4	40%	40%	+/-0	+4
Creating jobs	42%	42%	+/-0	34%	47%	-13	+13
Protecting the middle class	40%	48%	-8	34%	52%	-18	+10
Strengthening Social Security	37%	46%	-9	32%	48%	-16	+7
Improving the health care system	35%	46%	-11	28%	51%	-23	+12
Protecting the environment	30%	59%	-29	22%	62%	-40	+11

While Democrats have some potential themes to go after George W. Bush; such as his being too tied to big business and the wealthy (52% agree to 44% disagree), or questioning pieces of his agenda like doing a good job in Afghanistan, but not paying enough attention to the economy and domestic issues (48% agree to 45% disagree), or getting us too involved in other countries without clearly defined goals (53% agree to 40% disagree), these themes may not resonate as well with the American public as some Democrats believe.

Despite these voter concerns, there is data to suggest these Democratic attacks will not stick. George W. Bush has a nineteen-point lead over Democrats on “sharing your values,” a forty-five-point lead on personal responsibility, a forty-point lead on family, a forty-eight-point lead on moral values, a forty-three-point lead on honesty and integrity, and even a ten-point lead on representing community. Arguing that President Bush is the tool of big business becomes difficult given the favorable opinion and deep level of trust voters have in him personally at a values level.

Furthermore, while some voters would like him to be able to focus more on the economy and domestic issues, sixty-five percent (65%) approve of his handling of the economy; and he has an advantage over the Democrats on every economic issue except jobs (Bush and Congressional Democrats are at parity). He has gained ground on traditionally Democratic issues like protecting the middle class and strengthening Social Security. Most dramatically, George W. Bush a nine-point advantage over the Democrats on the education issue.

On the theme of being too involved in other countries without a clearly defined goal, Democrats must also be careful not to blindly attack because of their credibility gap. The fact that voters give the President a forty-three-point advantage on handling foreign affairs and a fifty-three-point advantage on safeguarding America from a terrorist threat should indicate that this policy area in particular is where the Congressional Democrats have a very real credibility problem.

Finally, the President has done a very good job staying above the partisan fights in Washington, making it much harder for the Washington Democrats to politicize his legislative agenda. Two-thirds of American voters agree that George W. Bush has improved the tone of politics in Washington today, and believe that George W. Bush has made significant efforts to reach out to members of the Democratic Party.

The question posed earlier was if George W. Bush can have a positive effect on Republican campaigns in the mid-term elections. The answer is a definite “yes, if.” If and only if Republicans maintain unity behind the President, allow him to set the agenda and provide cover and credibility on issues, will the President in turn be able to have an impact on Election Day. If

he fails to have an impact, the Congressional Republicans will have no one but themselves to blame.

The Fight for Congress

With just a short time remaining in any election, the last refuge of the pundit-scoundrel is to say, “the election all depends on turnout.” But analysis of turnout is not simply calculating raw numbers or percentages of the electorate as a whole, but an analysis of demographic groups and coalitions, their behaviors and trends.

In examining those voters who say they are “extremely likely” to vote in the November elections, Republicans are more intense than Democrats (+2%), men more intense than women (+3%), white voters more intense than African American voters (+7%), and married men are more intense than unmarried women (+8%) just to name a few. The significant opposing trend is that union households are eight-points more intense than non-union households. The net result is that on the generic Congressional ballot, those who vote Republican are more intense than those who vote Democratic by two percentage points.

Despite an underlying Republican intensity, the Democrats are sure to be encouraged by the fact they have regained the lead on the generic ballot by four percentage points (44% Democrat to 40% Republican) – driven by strong party loyalty among Democrats (+4% more supportive), a monolithic African American vote (84% choosing the Democrat), a gender gap where Republicans break even with men but have an eight point deficit with women, and a baby-boomer, pre-retirement cohort that gives a nine-point advantage to the Democrats (and are showing an equal propensity to vote as their senior counterparts).

But, does the generic ballot translate into control of Congress? Historically, Republican Congressional performance nationally has been about five to six points above the Republican score on the generic ballot, meaning that if the elections were held today, Republicans and Democrats nationally would end up getting approximately the same number of votes. Furthermore, the generic ballot tends to only have an impact at the margins, in races that have otherwise run to a draw or open seats that have no incumbent.

The question Republican candidates must ask themselves is how can they build on their own issue strengths and use the President’s credibility and support to grow those strengths into the election. A problem for the Republican Party is that their advantages versus the Democratic Party on traditional Republican issues have weakened, while their deficit on traditional Democratic issues has widened. To this extent, the Democratic strategy of “divide and conquer”

has shown some success. But it is not too late. The President's strengths have remained, and he can provide cover and support to Republican candidates across the country, so long as those Republicans let him.

Conclusions

It is increasingly clear that Congressional Democrats would like a political environment in the fall where Republican candidates put distance, or allow the Democrats to put distance, between themselves and the President on issues. If Republicans do so it would not only be at their own peril, but may put the balance of power in both the House and Senate at risk.

The Democrats would like to frame Republicans under the umbrella theme of being the tools of big business and the wealthy. They would like to have "homeland security" off the table by early September; a spending fight over health care, the environment, and education; legislation on "hate crimes"; linkage of the tax cut with the deficit; a debate on Social Security privatization, and tie all that together with a big "Enron" bow on top.

Although not up for re-election this year, George W. Bush is doing more than any other Republican in recent years in personally defining the Republican Party in voters' minds. While no Republican can count solely on the President to help them win office, it is clear that George W. Bush will not be the negative factor in the upcoming midterm elections, as is traditionally the case. The President may be the only factor keeping Republicans afloat rather than being caught up in the undertow of a "non-presidential" election.