

The Battleground 2004

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Democratic Strategic Analysis

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This is setting up to be another close election. We are a long way from where we were a year ago when 74 percent of voters approved of the job President Bush was doing. But even then, we were starting to see the weakness of Bush's support, as only 43 percent indicated they would definitely vote to reelect him. Currently, 55 percent of the electorate approves of Bush's job performance and 41 percent disapprove, and 5 percent are unsure. The electorate is even more negative with respect to the President's performance on the economy, with a majority (51 percent) disapproving and 46 percent approving. These low approval ratings have taken a toll on the President's reelection prospects, as Bush edges a generic Democratic nominee by only 4-points, 47 percent-43 percent. Only 39 percent of voters say they will definitely vote to reelect Bush next year.

Noticeably, of the voters who are undecided in the Presidential race, only 19 percent want to reelect the President and 57 percent want someone new. While voters still personally approve of the President (67 percent approve), voting for Bush is now much more highly correlated with economic approval and experience in the Bush economy than personal feelings about the President.

The electorate is already highly polarized along partisan lines, with very few people in the middle. Given Bush's promise to be a 'uniter' and to do things differently in Washington, it is striking that while 89 percent of Republicans say they will vote to reelect Bush, only 11 percent of Democrats plan to vote for him. On the one side you have Republicans, winners in the Bush economy, voters focused on foreign affairs and terrorism, white evangelicals, and married voters. On the other side you have Democrats, people who are close to someone who has lost a job, voters focused on the economy and jobs, unmarried voters, African American voters, and voters in labor households.

In this environment, the battle for the White House will be fought on two fronts. The first is the battle for the ever-shrinking middle—those who remain undecided on Bush's reelection. Not surprisingly, these tend to be political Independents. Their numbers are shrinking—they are 13 percent of the electorate, down from 22 percent just a year ago. On this front, Democrats are ahead of Republicans. Bush is not doing well among Independents; only 44 percent approve of the job he is doing, and 50 percent disapprove. Nor are they inclined to vote to reelect him (only 29 percent say they definitely will). They give Democrats an 11-point advantage on 'keeping America prosperous' and they don't think the economy is going well. Their vote today is split between the parties with 28 percent undecided.

The second battleground for the coming election is in energizing and turning out base voters. Here, Democrats have a ways to go. In part, this is because there is no Democratic presidential candidate yet to motivate base Democratic voters. With a nominee in the spring and the following convention, Democrats should become energized. However, it is noticeable that currently, Bush does much better with a low turnout scenario (64 percent job approval, 60 percent reelect among the 70% most likely voters) than in a high turnout scenario. Noticeably, African Americans (14-points) and Hispanic voters (16-points) are less likely to say they are extremely likely to turn out than are white voters. One exception is that labor union households say they are more likely to turn out than non-labor union households.

The President's declining ratings are reflected at the party level as well. Democrats enjoy a slight edge, 43 percent-41 percent, in the generic Congressional ballot. Voters are even more likely to select the Democrats as the party better able to solve the top problem facing the country, and Independents pick the Democratic party as their preferred problem-solver by 17-points.

The most pervasive concern is the economy and jobs, identified by 44 percent of voters combined as the country's most pressing problem, with no other issue reaching double-digits. Only one percent of voters rate the state of the economy as excellent, and over three-quarters view the economy as poor (34 percent) or only fair (42 percent). A majority of voters say changes in the employment rate will signal economic recovery. Only 12 percent say a rising stock market will signal recovery. Thus, the current jobless recovery is unlikely to change perceptions of the economy.

Perceptions of President Bush

The President's overall job approval has dropped to 55 percent of the electorate, with a growing number of voters, now 41 percent, disapproving, and 5 percent unsure. The intensity gap is even smaller, as almost as many voters strongly disapprove (35 percent) as strongly approve (39 percent).

Bush's highest approval ratings are among Republican base groups, including Republicans (91 percent approve of the job he is doing as President), in particular younger Republicans (94 percent), white evangelicals (76 percent), white married men with children (73 percent), younger white voters (67 percent), and rural southerners (65 percent). The President continues to be well regarded by people most concerned by terrorism and national defense (78 percent) and, interestingly, by voters whose top concern is education (65 percent). Finally, the relatively small number of Americans who view the economy as excellent or good (94 percent approve), those who believe the economy will be better a year from now (85 percent approve), voters who have noticed an increase in their paychecks (70 percent), younger investors (63 percent approve), and voters who do not know anyone who has lost their job in the last year (62 percent approve) give Bush high marks for his job performance.

Bush's approval, however, has decreased among many other groups outside of his base in the last year. Almost three-quarters of Democrats (73 percent disapprove) and one-half of independents (50 percent) disapprove of the President's overall performance. Older Democrats (76 percent disapprove), African American voters (64 percent), in particular African American women (70 percent), religiously unaffiliated voters (56 percent), union households (52 percent), and urban residents (48 percent) are most likely to disapprove. Majorities whose top concern is the economy and taxes (52 percent disapprove), who know someone laid off in the last year (50 percent), and who judge the state of the economy to be poor (77 percent disapprove) are disproportionately negative as well.

The electorate is even more negative with respect to the President's performance on the economy, with a majority (51 percent) disapproving and 46 percent approving. Larger majorities of the electorate in the Northeast and the West (56 percent in each case) disapprove of the President's performance in this area. Independents by almost a two-to-one ratio (61 percent disapprove, 35 percent approve) are negative about Bush on this dimension. Voters who are African American (78 percent disapprove), single (67 percent), members of labor unions (69 percent), downscale voters (57 percent), and college-educated women (56 percent) are disproportionately disapproving.

Even perceptions of President Bush's performance on foreign affairs, once the cornerstone of his overall approval, have slipped considerably. His approval on foreign affairs now stands at 53 percent, with 44 percent disapproving, numbers that closely resemble his overall job approval. It is noteworthy that the sense of bipartisanship on foreign affairs that prevailed during the first two years after September 11th has dissipated; currently, 88 percent of Republicans but only 19 percent of Democrats approve of the President's performance on foreign affairs. Independents (50 percent approve, 45 percent disapprove) are closely divided on this issue. These party-line perceptions of Bush's handling of international events suggest an increasingly polarized electorate that looks more like 2000 than 2002.

This polarization is reflected in the Presidential ballot, where Bush maintains a mere 4-point lead over a generic Democrat, 47 percent-43 percent. Core Bush supporters include Republicans (92 percent), Americans most worried about terrorism and national security (74 percent), white Evangelical voters (70 percent), white married men with children (67 percent), and all white married men (62 percent).

The Democrat wins disproportionate support from Democrats (84 percent support), with the consolidation of Democratic party voters now approaching Bush's consolidation of Republicans. The generic Democrat also does well among voters younger than 25 (55 percent support) and 70 and older (49 percent), in the South (50 percent support), and among working women (50 percent). Fourth-fifths of African Americans (80 percent) vote for the Democrat, as do 55 percent of voters in labor union households, 55 percent of Hispanic voters, 53 percent of urban residents, 52 percent of unmarried women, and 49 percent of women with college degrees. Finally, fifty-four

percent of voters whose top concern is either the economy and taxes or unemployment and jobs support the Democratic candidate.

In all, voters are evenly divided on whether Bush deserves reelection, with 48 percent agreeing and 47 percent indicating they will vote for somebody new. Only 39 percent of voters say they will definitely vote to reelect Bush next year, virtually equal to those who say they will definitely vote for a new person (41 percent). Importantly, only 38 percent of Independents want to reelect the President and 52 percent want someone new. Similarly, of those undecided in the Presidential race, only 19 percent want to reelect the President and 57 percent want someone new. Again, Bush's reelect numbers are highest in the South Central (67 percent will vote to reelect him) and Mountain (61 percent) regions and among voters concerned about terrorism (76 percent). In addition, white Evangelicals (70 percent), white married men with children (66 percent), younger white voters (61 percent), rural southerners (57 percent), and white male voters residing in suburbs (57 percent) are relatively more likely to say they will vote to reelect Bush next year. Those most likely to say they want someone new are Democrats (85 percent want a new person), African Americans (80 percent), single voters (65 percent), labor union members (65 percent), Hispanics (62 percent), and voters most concerned about the economy and jobs (58 percent).

Taken together, perceptions of Bush show a sharpening divide along party, regional, and racial lines. Finally, there is considerable evidence that seniors (49 percent approval overall, 46 percent foreign affairs, 40 percent economy, 43 percent re-elect) are turning against President Bush. These disproportionately likely voters, a key swing bloc in next year's election, are increasingly skeptical of Bush and look increasingly Democratic.

The Congressional Ballot

Democrats enjoy a slim margin in the generic Congressional ballot, 43 percent-41 percent, with 15 percent undecided. The anti-Bush coalition tends to include women, seniors, minorities, Democrats, and to a lesser degree, Independents, unmarried voters, labor union members, residents of urban areas, losers in the Bush economy, voters focused on the economy, jobs, and health care, and less likely voters.

Like the Presidential ballot, voters are closely divided in their party preference, and the demographic pattern of results is similar. Democrats garner the strongest support from Democrats (86 percent support), African Americans (80 percent), Hispanic voters (69 percent), members of labor unions (59 percent), people between 18 and 24 (61 percent), single voters (57 percent), younger working women (56 percent), religiously unaffiliated voters (55 percent), low-income voters (54 percent), residents of larger cities (54 percent) and urban areas more generally (53 percent), and both unemployment-minded (54 percent) and economy-minded voters (50 percent).

The Republican base is comprised of Republicans (84 percent support), people who perceive the economy as good or excellent (78 percent), white Evangelical voters

(60 percent), people most concerned by terrorism (59 percent), white male suburban residents (57 percent), white married voters with children (56 percent), and white married men (54 percent). Republican support is concentrated in Mountain (52 percent) and South Central (51 percent) states.

Independents resemble voters overall, giving a two-point edge, 33 percent-31 percent, to Democrats, with 35 percent undecided. In many respects, the Congressional ballot mimics the Presidential ballot, though more voters (15 percent) are undecided in the former than in the latter (10 percent). A noteworthy piece of good news for Democrats is that Democrats are currently more energized on behalf of Democratic candidates for Congress than Republicans are for their Congressional candidates.

Democrats and Republicans on the Issues

Democrats have also made considerable inroads on several issues. By a six-point margin, 43 percent-37 percent, voters choose the Democrats as the party more likely to do a better job solving the country's most pressing problem. Moreover, key swing groups, such as undecided voters in the Presidential ballot (by 14-points), moderates (by 17-points), Independents (by 17-points), and seniors (by 12-points) are choosing the Democrats by larger, double-digit margins.

This preference for Democratic approaches, as opposed to those embraced by Republicans in general or President Bush, surfaces on a number of issues, in particular the economy, jobs, and health care. On creating jobs, Democrats have a 16-point advantage over Republicans, up from a 3-point margin last year. Voters pick Democrats, by 23-points, as the party better equipped to improve the health care system, the same advantage as last year. By 11-points, Democrats are preferred as the party more likely to be able to control health care costs. Thus, the Democrats are viewed as the party better able to address the electorate's key domestic concerns.

There have also been a few notable reversals, with Democrats now enjoying an 11-point advantage on balancing the budget, up from a 1-point deficit in 2002; a 1-point edge in keeping America prosperous, up from a 9-point deficit; and a 1-point edge in sharing values, up from a 3-point deficit. These are key issues for voters—issues on which shifts are highly significant for voters making their vote choices.

Only on protecting the nation from terrorism, foreign affairs, and holding the line on taxes do Republicans maintain an advantage, and even in these areas the Republican advantage has dwindled from last year. Safeguarding American from terrorism continues to be the Republicans' strongest suit, with voters giving them a 24-point margin on this issue. In 2002, however, this margin was 36-points. Regarding foreign affairs more generally, Republicans have a six-point margin, suggesting that many voters are beginning to differentiate between the party's respective approaches to combating terrorism and to handling international events more broadly. Finally, keeping taxes low is a third Republican strength, as the electorate chooses them by a 19-point margin, down from a 24-point margin last year.

DEMOCRATS VS. REPUBLICANS			
	JANUARY, 2002	JUNE, 2002	SEPTEMBER, 2003
	<i>Democratic Advantage</i>	<i>Democratic Advantage</i>	<i>Democratic Advantage</i>
<i>Protecting the Environment</i>	+32	+40	+32
<i>Improving the health care system</i>	+15	+23	+23
<i>Strengthening Social Security</i>	+12	+16	+16
<i>Creating Jobs</i>	+7	+13	+16
<i>Protecting the middle class</i>	+7	+17	+15
<i>Balancing the Federal Budget</i>	-11	-1	+11
<i>Keeping health care costs down</i>	*	*	+11
<i>Ensuring retirement security</i>	*	*	+10
<i>Improving education</i>	-7	+3	+8
<i>Sharing Your Values</i>	-11	-3	+1
<i>Keeping America prosperous</i>	-17	-9	+1
<i>Handling foreign affairs</i>	*	*	-5
<i>Holding the line on taxes</i>	-29	-24	-19
<i>Safeguarding US from Terrorism</i>	-45	-36	-24

*Question not asked in 2002 surveys

President Bush does only marginally better than Congressional Republicans versus Democrats on the issues, with the exceptions of terrorism, in which he enjoys a 38-point advantage over Democrats, and sharing values, where he holds a 6-point edge over Democrats. His only other issue advantages are on handling foreign affairs (by 19-points) and taxes (by 19-points). On these issues, however, Bush's standing has declined relative to Democrats, and ratings on his ability to keep America prosperous have shown an especially sharp decline. Democrats have pulled nearly even with the President in this area, up from a 17-point deficit just a year ago.

Meanwhile, Democrats have upped their advantages to double-digit margins on key economic issues. They lead Bush by 11-points on protecting the middle class, by 12-points on strengthening Social Security, and by 10-points on balancing the federal budget. And, perhaps most significantly in the current environment, Democrats have 10-point advantages over the President on creating jobs. Democrats have smaller edges on improving the health care system (by 8-points) and on keeping health costs down (by 4-points). Finally, on education, Bush had held a 10-point advantage last year, evidence that he had had success in co-opting this traditionally Democratic issue, but Democrats now hold a slight edge (by 2-points).

In all, issue lines have sharpened in the last year. Bush and Congressional Republicans continue to maintain advantages, albeit smaller ones, on terrorism and taxes. Across the range of domestic issues, from protecting the middle class to balancing the

budget to creating jobs, Democrats have gained considerable ground. Currently, the electorate is significantly more likely to see Democrats as the party of both fairer and more effective management of the economy.

BUSH VS. CONGRESSIONAL DEMOCRATS			
	JANUARY, 2002	JUNE, 2002	SEPTEMBER, 2003
	<i>Democratic Advantage</i>	<i>Democratic Advantage</i>	<i>Democratic Advantage</i>
<i>Protecting the Environment</i>	+31	+29	+24
<i>Strengthening Social Security</i>	+10	+9	+12
<i>Protecting the middle class</i>	+9	+8	+11
<i>Ensuring retirement security</i>	*	*	+11
<i>Balancing the Federal Budget</i>	-7	-4	+10
<i>Creating Jobs</i>	+3	0	+10
<i>Improving the health care system</i>	+15	+11	+8
<i>Keeping health care costs down</i>	*	*	+4
<i>Improving education</i>	-16	-10	+2
<i>Keeping America prosperous</i>	-19	-17	-1
<i>Sharing Your Values</i>	-18	-19	-6
<i>Handling foreign affairs</i>	*	*	-19
<i>Holding the line on taxes</i>	-34	-27	-19
<i>Safeguarding US from Terrorism</i>	-59	-53	-38

*Question not asked in 2002 surveys

With the exception of education, Independents give Democrats an even larger advantage over President Bush than does the electorate overall. In particular, on protecting the middle class (by 18-points), creating jobs (by 20-points), keeping America prosperous (by 11-points), and improving the health care system (by 15-points) Independents choose Democrats over Bush. The President does better on values (an 11-point margin), foreign affairs (by 12-points), taxes (by 8-points), and, especially, terrorism (by 48-points). Thus, among Independents, there is an even sharper divide between domestic issues, where Democrats are their clear choice, and terrorism and values domains, where President Bush maintains sizable advantages.

Finally, despite the Republicans having the bully pulpit, the images of the two parties are similar overall. Voters are 51 percent favorable and 40 percent unfavorable toward the Republican Party and 49 percent favorable and 38 percent unfavorable toward the Democrats. Independents also have similar images of the parties, and they are more net-positive toward both Democrats (44 percent favorable, 21 percent unfavorable) and Republicans (43 percent favorable, 18 percent unfavorable) than are voters overall.

The Economy

The Democratic advantage on the economy bodes well for the party's electoral prospects in the year ahead, as the economy and jobs are by far voters' top concerns. One-quarter of the electorate (25 percent) nominate the economy as the number one problem facing the country today, and another 17 percent pick unemployment (9 percent) and jobs (8 percent). Terrorism (7 percent) trails slightly behind these economic issues and education (5 percent) and health care (5 percent) are the only other concerns mentioned by as many as five percent of voters. Only 3 percent say taxes are a top concern. Clearly, the economy in general and job security in particular are the predominant concerns among voters.

The economy generally is of disproportionate concern to white male suburbanites (44 percent nominate it as their top concern), white married men with children (40 percent), labor union members (37 percent), in the Midwest (36 percent), to white men (36 percent), Democrats (35 percent), in particular Democratic men (44 percent), unmarried men (36 percent), and college graduates (34 percent). Upscale voters (38 percent) are also worried about the economy.

Unemployment and jobs specifically is the top problem among 17 percent of the electorate, and is of relatively higher concern to African Americans (33 percent), in particular African American men (45 percent) and younger African Americans (40 percent), residents of the rural South (37 percent), conservative Democrats (31 percent), and to voters in union households (28 percent). These groups, with the exception of rural southerners, lean solidly Democratic now.

Terrorism remains of elevated concern to younger working women (15 percent) and white women with children (14 percent) as well to voters who say the country is moving in the right direction (13 percent). This is evidence that there continues to be a number of security-minded women two years after the September 11 attacks.

Still, it is the economy and economic-related worries that dominate the political landscape, and there is a marked pessimism about its current state. **Three-quarters of the electorate view economic conditions as either poor (34 percent) or just fair (42 percent), and only one percent describes them as excellent.** Minority voters are especially gloomy, with 92 percent of African Americans and 86 percent of Hispanic/Latino voters who are negative. There is not a single demographic or political group which rates the economy net positive.

There is also a clear partisan divide in economic perceptions. A near unanimity of Democrats, 95 percent, rates the economy as poor (54 percent) or fair (41 percent), while Republicans are only slightly more negative (55 percent poor or fair) than positive (44 percent good or excellent) in their evaluation. Independents are a bit more negative than the electorate as a whole; forty-one percent see economic conditions as poor and 39 percent as fair.

Only 38 percent of voters are confident of their family's economic future and only 26 percent think their local area is growing or in recovery. Almost half of voters, 47 percent, say their local area is on the downside or in recession. A plurality of voters, 40 percent, are confident that the nation's economy will be better a year from now, but only 10 percent believe it will be much better. Thirty-eight percent believe it will be about the same, and 19 percent predict it will be worse. Voters are no more optimistic about their own personal economic futures, as only one-third (33 percent) believe they and their families will experience improved finances in the next year. A plurality, 49 percent, says their financial state will be unchanged and 13 percent predict a decline in their financial fortunes. Although optimism about the future surpasses current evaluations of the economy, it is not widespread, and voters are skeptical of either a national or personal improvement in the economy anytime soon.

While unemployment and job insecurity are important concerns within the lagging economy, health care costs are also a notable worry for many voters. Thirty percent say rising health care costs are their greatest personal worry, with 44 percent of seniors, and 52 percent of retired women, saying this is true for them. This particular economic concern may begin to fuel dissatisfaction with President Bush and the Republicans who control Congress if prescription drug benefits and other programs to help seniors meet their health care needs are sacrificed to other priorities and budget constraints.

Also of concern for Republicans should be the electorate's judgments about which specific trends they indicate will constitute an economic recovery. **A solid majority of voters, 61 percent, say that changes in the employment rate will be the primary sign that the economy is in recovery.** Only 12 percent consider a rising stock market to be an indicator that conditions have improved. Three-quarters of both Independents (76 percent) and undecided voters (75 percent) say that the unemployment rate will be their primary sign of the economy recovering. Thus, the current "jobless recovery" and predicted increases in economic growth in the near future are unlikely to lift the electorate's mood with respect to the state of the economy unless they see a clear impact on job creation and security. This situation resembles late 1991 and 1992, when an earlier President Bush presided over a so-called recovering economy that voters continued to perceive as weak.

The Key Divides

With the electorate in its entirety displaying increased partisan polarization and a return to near-parity between President Bush and Republicans and Democrats, there are several sharp dividing lines within the electorate. These more specific divides revolve around differing perceptions of the economy, differing issue emphases, and gender and marital status. These divides are central to understanding the current political environment.

The Bush economy gap--Winners and losers

The “economy” gap is the most important division now in the electorate, underpinning many other traditional cleavages. People’s feelings about the economy and their own personal financial situations are another source of division within the electorate. President Bush’s overall approval rating is very much a function of whether voters consider current economic conditions to be excellent or good (94 percent approve), fair (60 percent), or poor (20 percent). His reelect numbers are comparable, with voters who are positive about the economy (88 percent reelect) almost unanimous in supporting Bush, those who see the economy as just fair divided (52 percent reelect, 42 percent new person), and the most pessimistic decidedly against Bush’s reelection (15 percent reelect, 81 percent someone new).

Similarly, Bush wins a solid majority of voters who rate the economy positively (87 percent support), a slight majority of those who view the economic environment as fair (52 percent, 38 percent support for the Democratic nominee), and a mere 13 percent of people who believe the economy is poor. These three groups also vary in their perceptions of who can keep the country prosperous. Eighty-five percent of voters who are positive about the economy say Bush, as do 48 percent of those who say the economy is fair. In contrast, 78 percent of people who rate the economy negatively pick the Democrats.

Closer examination of voters who have personally prospered during the Bush years and compared to those who have been set back economically illustrates a sharp gap. The most obvious winners in the Bush economy are those who have noticed an increase in their take-home pay, 28 percent of the electorate, and these voters are particularly fond of the President. Seventy percent approve of his overall job performance, 64 percent say they will reelect him, and 63 percent vote for him over the Democratic nominee. Not surprisingly, almost one-third of Bush economy winners (31 percent) are positive about current economic conditions, and less than one-quarter (24 percent) think conditions are poor.

Voters most likely to report an increase in their take-home pay include younger Republicans (49 percent have noticed an increase), high-income voters (43 percent), white married men with children (43 percent), and younger men (40 percent). Republicans (38 percent) are more likely than either Democrats (21 percent) or Independents (20 percent) to have noticed an increase in their pay.

Losers in the Bush economy are a far different story. Those 42 percent of voters who know someone or have themselves personally lost a job in the past year have sharply negative perceptions of the President. Only 44 percent approve (and 50 percent disapprove) of the job he is doing, only 38 percent indicate they will vote to reelect him (55 percent say they will vote for a new person), and 38 percent support him over the Democratic candidate (49 percent support).

Those voters who are disproportionately likely to know someone who has lost a job recently are concentrated among younger Democrats (67 percent know a person who has lost a job in the last year), younger African American voters (67 percent), single

voters (66 percent), Hispanic voters (65 percent), African American women (64 percent), and voters between 18 and 34 (64 percent). In contrast, only one-third (33 percent) of Republicans know a person who has recently been out of work.

In all, there are fewer voters willing to give the President the benefit of the doubt on the economy. As more time passes since the September 11 attacks and in Bush's tenure, the electorate is holding him increasingly responsible for the state of the economy and for their personal financial situations. The electoral implications of a continuing weak economy or one that does not grow rapidly enough to create new jobs should be troubling for Republicans.

The Gender Gap

The first is a gender gap, with women both more pessimistic about the state of the economy and disapproving of Bush and Republicans. Regarding President Bush, 59 percent of men and 50 percent of women approve of his overall job performance. There is an identical 9-point gender gap in the President's reelect numbers (men 53 percent reelect, women 44 percent reelect). This gap is more pronounced in the Presidential ballot, where Bush leads the Democratic candidate by 14-points, 52 percent-38 percent, among men, but trails by 4-points among women (47 percent-43 percent). Key to Democratic victories will be generating as much enthusiasm for Democrats among women as Republicans have generated among men. Noticeably, non-college women, who have been moving Republican in the last few elections, vote for Bush by 7-points (50 percent-43 percent), while college-educated women vote Democratic by 9-points (49 percent-40 percent).

This electoral gender gap is somewhat attributable to men's and women's different judgments about of the economy. In particular, they disagree about whether Bush or Democrats are better able to keep the country prosperous; men choose Bush by 8-points, while women pick the Democrats by a 3-point margin. Although women are only slightly more likely than men to view current economic conditions as negative, 77 percent and 74 percent, respectively, they appear more skeptical of the President and more favorable towards Democrats. Non-college women, who are negative about the current economy, give Bush a 6-point advantage on keeping America prosperous and give Democrats only single-digit advantages on creating jobs and being for the middle class. A clearer economic alternative message from Democrats is key to winning these voters.

The Marriage Gap

Marital status is a second key divide within the electorate. Unmarried men in particular are increasingly trending Democratic. The President's overall job approval stands at 62 percent among married men and 54 percent among married women. However, unmarried men (52 percent approve) look more like traditionally Democratic unmarried women (45 percent approve) on this measure than they do their married counterparts. This pattern is stronger with respect to Bush's economic performance,

which only 35 percent of both unmarried women and men give positive marks. A slim majority of married men (53 percent) and women (50 percent) stand in stark contrast.

Electoral indicators show the same trend. While majorities of both married men (58 percent reelect) and women (53 percent) say they will vote for Bush next year, only 43 percent of unmarried men and 36 percent of unmarried women do. Similarly, in the Presidential ballot, Bush carries married men by 22-points, edges the Democratic nominee among married women (by 2-points), but loses to the Democrat among unmarried men (by 3-points) and women (by 14-points).

Much of this split is attributable to perceptions of the economy and of which party can better keep the country prosperous. Eighty percent of unmarried women and unmarried men rate the economy negatively, while married men (72 percent negative) and women (74 percent negative) are slightly less gloomy. There is a larger gap in evaluations of Bush and Democrats, with majorities of married voters (men by 18-points and women by 6-points) saying that Bush can better keep America prosperous, but with Democrats the choice of unmarried men (by 15-points) and women (by 17-points). It is noteworthy that the gender and marital gaps are wider on the politics of the economy than on their perceptions of economic conditions as such.

The Parental Status Gap

A related gap is between parents and childless adults, as the first group leans toward Bush and Republicans, and the second group trends Democratic. Almost two-thirds (64 percent) of adults with children living at home approve of Bush's job performance, but only one-half (50 percent) of childless adults do. On the question of whether Bush deserves to be re-elected, there is a comparable difference between parents (56 percent reelect) and non-parents (45 percent reelect), and dads (62 percent reelect) are particularly likely to believe the President should be reelected. Moms are more divided (51 percent reelect, 41 percent someone new), but white married moms, a key group Bush went after in 2000, want to reelect Bush (64 percent) at almost the same rate as their male counterparts (66 percent).

Results on the generic Presidential ballot are similar; Bush carries parents by 18-points, 54 percent-36 percent, and trails childless adults by 2-points, 46 percent-44 percent. Again, dads are solidly behind the President, supporting him over the Democratic candidate by more than two-to-one (61 percent-28 percent). Moms vote for Bush by 6-points but white married moms support him by 30-points. As is the case with the gender and marriage gaps, parents and non-parents differ considerably in their judgments of whether Bush or Democrats can keep America prosperous; by 18-points, parents say Bush can, but childless adults choose Democrats by 5-points. Also paralleling the gender and marriage patterns, although adults with children and those without are sharply divided with respect to President Bush and about whether he or Democrats are better able to ensure economic prosperity, they do not differ in their perceptions of the economy currently. Seventy-seven percent of non-parents rate economic conditions as negative, slightly more than the 72 percent of parents who feel likewise.

The issue concern gap

Just as people who are pessimistic about national or their own personal economic situations are skeptical of President Bush, so too are voters who rate the economy and jobs as their top worry. Twenty-five percent of the electorate picks the economy as the number one problem facing the country today, and these voters are concentrated among Democrats (35 percent nominate the economy and taxes as their top concern), in particular moderate or liberal Democrats (41 percent) and Democratic men (44 percent). Thirty-seven percent of younger men, 37 percent of dads, 37 percent of labor union members, 36 percent of unmarried men, 35 percent of younger Hispanic voters, 35 percent of white married, and 34 percent of college graduates agree. In all, men (34 percent) more than women (24 percent) see the economy and taxes as their top worry.

Those voters who pick the economy as their top concern are not favorable towards the President. Only 45 percent approve of the job Bush is doing, barely one-third (37 percent) say he deserves to be reelected, and they support a Democratic candidate over Bush by 18-points. By a whopping 20 points such voters choose the Democrats in Congress over Bush as better able to keep the nation prosperous.

Seventeen percent of the electorate is more worried about unemployment and jobs. This is the case for one-third (33 percent) of African American voters, in particular African American men (45 percent) and younger African Americans (40 percent). Conservative Democrats (31 percent nominate unemployment and jobs as their top concern), voters in labor union households (28 percent), and people with less than a high school education (26 percent) are also relatively more jobs-sensitive.

These groups are traditional Democratic voting blocs and, like voters concerned about the economy overall, they are skeptical of President Bush. Only 46 percent of those most concerned about unemployment and jobs approve of his job performance, only 38 percent say he merits reelection, and they give the Democratic candidate a 21-point margin over Bush. Not surprisingly, such voters also judge Democrats as more able than the President of maintaining America's prosperity, by 21-points.

Economy- and jobs-minded voters comprise 46 percent of the electorate and look similarly skeptical of the President. For a smaller group, however, the 8 percent of voters whose chief concern is terrorism and national defense, the picture is brighter for the President. These voters are disproportionately found among younger Hispanics (17 percent nominate terrorism and national defense as their top concern), younger women (10 percent), homemakers (15 percent), people with a family member in the military (15 percent), and white married women with children (14 percent).

Security-sensitive voters are strongly positive about the President. About three-quarters (78 percent) approve of the job he is doing, say he deserve to be reelected (76 percent), and vote for him (74 percent) against a Democrat. These impressive electoral indicators even translate into upbeat perceptions of Bush's ability to protect America's

prosperity; security-minded voters select Bush over the Democrats by 40-points. And they are decidedly less pessimistic than the electorate about current economic conditions, with 60 percent rating them as negative. People whose dominant worry is terrorism and security, though a relatively small percentage of the electorate, are a significant part of the President's base, and their approval of Bush's foreign policy continues to extend into other aspects of his performance.

The gap between veterans and military relatives

Finally, an intriguing divide is between military veterans (16 percent of the electorate) and voters who are not themselves veterans or currently active but have a family member in the military (4 percent of the electorate). Sixty percent of veterans approve of the President's performance, while only 36 percent of military relatives do. Likewise, a majority of veterans (54 percent) believe Bush should be reelected, but only 37 percent of military relatives concur. In the Presidential ballot, Bush wins a majority of veterans (52 percent support, 14-point margin), and the Democratic candidate wins a plurality of military relatives (45 percent support, 6-point margin).

These two groups differ in their perceptions of Bush and the economy as well. Veterans (by 13-points) select Bush as more likely than Democrats to ensure prosperity, while military relatives choose Democrats by 40-points. This is the case even though there is no difference in evaluations of the economy itself; three-quarters of both veterans (75 percent) and military relatives (74 percent) give the economy negative marks. This differentiation between veterans and military relatives, groups that have both helped comprise a solid Republican base of military voters, should be cause for Republican concern. Military relatives may be particularly anxious about America's intensified and extended operations in Iraq and elsewhere, and this anxiety may be producing increasing doubts about President Bush.

The Battlegrounds

Next year's elections are shaping up as competitive, polarizing, and close. In this political environment, the importance of swing voters cannot be overstated. Currently, four groups look particularly up for grabs and constitute key battlegrounds in the year ahead.

Seniors

The first battleground is seniors, who have turned on President Bush in the last year and should be an increasingly contested voter bloc. Less than half (49 percent) of seniors now approve of Bush's overall performance, and almost as many (45 percent) disapprove. The news is equally bad for Bush with respect to his reelect numbers (43 percent) and his match up with a Democratic candidate, which he loses by 2-points, 47 percent-45 percent. Seniors give Bush relatively low approval on his performance on both foreign affairs (46 percent approve) and on the economy (40 percent), and they give Democrats a 15-point advantage over Bush on Social Security.

Older seniors (aged 70 and older) are even more negative towards the President. Only 47 percent approve of his job (48 percent disapprove), only 40 percent say he should be reelected (54 percent think a new person should), and he trails the Democratic candidate by 7-points. And majorities of older seniors disapprove of the President's performance on both foreign affairs (51 percent disapprove, 43 percent approve) and the economy (55 percent disapprove, 38 percent approve). Seniors generally, and older seniors in particular, are increasingly Democratic.

The Suburbs

Suburban voters are a second battleground, and they are more evenly divided. Fifty-six percent of suburban residents approve of Bush's performance, and 55 percent approve of his handling of foreign affairs. On the economy, however, their appraisal of Bush is mixed, with 48 percent approving and 50 percent disapproving. All three approval ratings are higher than those of the electorate overall. Moreover, a majority of suburban voters (51 percent) think Bush merits reelection, and a plurality (48 percent) votes for him against a Democratic candidate (41 percent support).

These voters are not monolithic, and there is a particularly noteworthy distinction between upscale and downscale suburban voters. While there are small differences in the extent to which they approve of Bush (downscale 57 percent approve, upscale 52 percent), believe he deserves to be reelected (downscale 50 percent reelect, upscale 48 percent), and support Bush against a Democrat (downscale 49 percent support, upscale 47 percent), there are larger gaps on more specific approval measures.

On foreign policy, downscale suburbanites are disproportionately approving (60 percent approve, 39 percent disapprove), while upscale suburbanites are markedly less positive (42 percent approve, 49 percent disapprove). A smaller divide on the economy is evident as well, with a majority of downscale suburban voters approving of Bush (52 percent approve, 44 percent disapprove) and a majority of their upscale counterparts disapproving (47 percent approve, 52 percent disapprove).

Independent voters

A third battleground is Independents, a group that makes up a smaller percentage of the electorate now (13 percent) than they did a year ago (22 percent). They currently lean Democratic and away from President Bush. On Bush's overall job performance (44 percent approve, 50 percent disapprove), and especially his performance on the economy (35 percent approve, 61 percent disapprove), Independents are more negative than voters overall, and they look much more like Democrats than Republicans. Regarding the President's handling of foreign policy, however, Independents (50 percent approve, 45 percent disapprove) resemble the electorate overall (53 percent approve, 44 percent disapprove).

Only 38 percent of Independents think Bush is worthy of reelection, while 52 percent says it is time for a new person. They are almost evenly divided on the Presidential ballot, with the President holding a 1-point edge (36 percent-35 percent) over the Democratic candidate. Independents, then, constitute perhaps the most hotly contested battleground in the election.

Education voters

Finally, education-oriented voters, the 6 percent of the electorate who view education as their number one worry, are a critical battleground. Such voters are concentrated among older working women (13 percent nominate education as their top concern), older African Americans (11 percent), younger Independents (11 percent), and moms (11 percent).

Education-minded voters like the job Bush is doing overall (65 percent approve), a majority (54 percent) both favors his reelection and votes for Bush (52 percent support) over a Democratic challenger (by 13-points). However, such voters are evenly divided on whether Bush (41 percent) or Democrats (41 percent) are better able to handle education.

Turnout

While the political terrain in general and key voter blocs in particular are increasingly hospitable to Democrats, next year's electoral contests will also hinge on voter turnout. In this area, prospects are brighter for the President and Republicans, as several elements of their voter base indicate they are especially likely to vote next year. In a low-turnout scenario, Bush enjoys a 36-point lead (among the 60-percent of most likely voters). However, looking at all voters, Bush is up only 4-points.

Republicans (77 percent extremely likely to vote) are more likely to turn out than Democrats (71 percent). Furthermore, 76 percent of voters who support the President in the generic ballot are extremely likely voters, while only 73 percent of his Democratic challenger's supporters are. On the Congressional ballot, those who will support a Republican (78 percent extremely likely) are more likely to vote than Democratic voters (71 percent).

The same trend is evident for most Republican- and Democratic-leaning demographic groups. Higher-income Americans (87 percent extremely likely) are far more likely to vote than are lower-income Americans (62 percent extremely likely). The former group gives the President a 10-point margin (51 percent-40 percent), and a majority of the latter group (50 percent) supports the Democrat (by 8-points).

Marital status is another dividing line with regards to voter turnout, and one that again bodes well for Bush and Republicans. The married voters who are quite positive about the President (52 percent support, including 57 percent of married men) are disproportionately likely to vote next year (78 percent extremely likely, including 81

percent of married men). In contrast, only 69 percent of both unmarried women and unmarried men indicate they are extremely likely to vote.

Turnout of suburban voters, a key electoral battleground, is more mixed. More than residents of rural (64 percent extremely likely) and urban (76 percent) areas, suburban voters (78 percent) are motivated to turn out in 2004.

Finally, Democrats can take some comfort from the disproportionate energy of labor voters. Residents of labor union households (92 percent extremely likely) and union members (77 percent) are relatively more likely to vote. These core Democratic groups seem particularly motivated and, regardless of who is the eventual Democratic nominee, they hold sharply negative impressions of Bush. Majorities of both members of labor households (55 percent support the Democrat) and of unions (55 percent support) say they will vote for the Democratic candidate over Bush, by 18- and 24-point margins, respectively. These groups were important sources of votes and mobilization for Al Gore in 2000, and they appear primed to play a similar role for the 2004 Democratic nominee.