

The Battleground 2004 Poll

September, 2003

Republican Strategic Analysis

by Ed Goeas

It was Michael Barone who first coined the phrase “Forty-nine Percent Nation,” in his introduction to his Almanac of American Politics 2002 which was released shortly after the dust of the 2000 election had settled. In Barone’s analysis he pointed out that neither party gained a full majority of the vote in any of the last three presidential elections or the last three congressional elections, and the parties had basically wrestled each other to a draw at forty-nine percent of the popular vote.

Both Barone’s analysis and the actual results of those elections come as little surprise, as The Battleground Poll has been reflecting that the two major political parties had reached basic parity in the early 1990’s and had remained fairly stable throughout the Nineties. What was surprising in Michael Barone’s analysis was the data showing “ticket-splitting” was in decline and “straight-ticket voting” was becoming more and more dominant. This only highlights the point that each party’s ability to raise the intensity amongst their voters and mechanically turn them out on Election Day will once again play an increasingly important role to electoral victories.

Does this mean that dramatic shifts cannot occur in congressional year elections when voter intensity plays a larger role in benefiting a particular party? Not necessarily! We have already seen exceptions, as was the case in both the 1994 and 2002 elections for the Republicans -- when Republican voters had much higher intensity than Democratic voters and took approximately fifty-two percent of the popular vote. Does this mean that presidential elections in the near future are likely to reinforce this notion of a forty-nine percent nation? Once again – not necessarily! It does suggest, however, that in presidential election years when turnout is higher, presidential elections will start off closer and more competitive, regardless of the strengths and weaknesses of the individual party’s presidential candidates, and the end of the campaign will not be significantly impacted from fluctuations in the basic parity of the two parties.

In the time after Michael Barone's original article, there has been a great deal written about America being a "Forty-nine Percent Nation." It has been fifteen years since a presidential candidate from either political party has taken a majority of the vote. Early signs are the 2004 presidential election campaign is starting off the way the 2000 presidential election ended--very close and very competitive. The latest Battleground poll only reinforces this notion, and we may very well have another forty-nine percent victor. It should also be noted, however, that there are several scenarios that can fall within the model of the "Forty-nine Percent Nation" that could have quite different results for not only Republicans and Democrats, but for the Nation as a whole!

Will the 2004 Election be more like 1992 or 1996?

There are two scenarios, one favoring George W. Bush, the other favoring Democrats running for the Democratic nomination. For over a year now "National Democrats" have been working to paint the political environment George W. Bush faces to be a repeat of his father's in 1992. Our latest Battleground Poll not only shows George W. Bush in a stronger position than his father at a comparable time in his 1992 re-election campaign, but he is also running even or ahead of Bill Clinton's re-elect measurements at a comparable time in his 1996 re-election campaign!

The two measurements of the strength (or weakness) of an incumbent president that are most commonly used in survey research are presidential "job approval" and presidential "re-elect." As the numbers below illustrate, George W. Bush is running ahead of both his two predecessors in voters' approval of the job he is currently doing as president (Bush '03 net +13, Clinton '96 net +8, and Bush '91 net +9). While there can not be a great deal made over the differences between the three on presidential job approval, the presidential re-elect shows George W. Bush in a much stronger position (net +1) than either George Bush in 1991 (net -11) or Bill Clinton in 1996 (net -9).

Presidential Job Approval

Bush '91 48% approve /39% disapprove
Clinton '96 52% approve/44% disapprove
Bush '03 54% approve/41% disapprove

Presidential Re-elect

Bush '91 35% re-elect /46% depends on oppon.
Clinton '96 41% re-elect/50% depends on oppon.
Bush '03 48% re-elect /47% depends on oppon.

There are several points to be made in response to some of the spin the Democrats are putting on the street in recent weeks about the President's job approval numbers. First,

that the President's numbers are in a "free fall." Smart move on the Democrats' part-- they had to have known that the average gain for a President in his job approval at the time of an armed conflict is eighteen points and that those higher job approval numbers would stay at those levels for two to four months before returning to pre-war levels. In Tarrance Group polling this year we had George W. Bush's job approval rating at 58% in January (just prior to the State of the Union Address), 58% in March (just prior to the start of the conflict), 56% in mid-July (just prior to the August recess for Congress), and now in mid-September at 54%. Not exactly what one would call a "free fall" -- unless you want to ignore the "war bump" from a historical perspective!

The second spin has two variations: *the only thing propping up the President's numbers is the highly intense support from Republican voters* or *this is historically the most polarized electorate we have ever seen for a modern day President.* We will explore the latter of these two Democratic "talking points" later in the analysis, but the bottom line is that it is normal for the party out of power to have more intensity/dislike of the other party's sitting President. What is not the norm is for the voters of the party in control of the White House to have equal or (in many cases) higher intensity as has been the case with Republican voters. George W. Bush became a different President in the eyes of much of the American Electorate as a result of his handling of September 11th, and many Democrats are still in denial of that fact. This President has a depth of connection with voters that cannot be underestimated. Throughout the last two years, forty percent or more of the voters have strongly approved of the job he is doing as President (his father never broke forty percent strong approval even at the height of the Gulf War)! They see him as a strong leader, as caring about people like themselves, and as reaching across the aisle to the Democrats for solutions to our Nation's problems (as he did with prescription drugs)!

There is an additional area where the data shows a stark contrast between where George Bush was at a comparable time in 1991 and where George W. Bush is today, and that is with voter confidence on issue handling. While George W. Bush has kept a nineteen point advantage over the Democrats on handling foreign affairs and a twenty point lead on taxes, and he has a 62% to 24% advantage on voters' confidence in his safeguarding America from terrorist threats, the President has also either erased or minimized the Democratic edge on voter confidence on a whole host of issue areas that were traditionally Democratic advantages.

When comparing George W. Bush versus Democrats in Congress on voter confidence today to where George Bush was in contrast to the Democrats in 1991, the results are dramatic. On “sharing your values,” George Bush had a three-point deficit in 1991 – George W. Bush has a six-point advantage today. On “improving the health care system,” George Bush had a thirty-six-point deficit – George W. Bush has lowered that to an eight-point deficit today. On “improving education,” George Bush had a seventeen-point deficit – George W. Bush has erased that to a two-point deficit today. On “strengthening Social Security,” George Bush had a thirty-two-point deficit – George W. Bush has lowered that deficit to twelve-points today. On “creating jobs,” George Bush had a twenty-eight-point deficit – George W. Bush has the Democratic advantage down to ten-points. Finally on voters’ confidence on “keeping America prosperous,” George Bush had a nine-point deficit – George W. Bush has a one-point advantage today. (Historical note: The Democrats have never won a presidential election when they did not have at least a seven-point advantage with the issue of “keeping America Prosperous!”)

Will the 2004 election be more like 1992 or 1996? Well, in looking at this battery of questions it certainly looks as if George W. Bush is in a much stronger position than his father in 1991 *and* his approval and re-elect numbers are stronger than Clinton’s in 1996. Most important, he is in a position to competitively promote his solutions to the Nation’s problems versus those of the Democrats, as opposed to the position George Bush found himself in with the 1991 political environment, where he had to fight back against the “class warfare” of the Democrats’ campaign.

Today’s most common myth -- Polarization of Voters!

Sometimes focusing on one measurement is misleading or doesn’t tell the whole story. That is certainly the case when using the presidential job approval measurement in trying to analyze the depth of George W. Bush’s standing with the American electorate. Yes, when looking at Bush’s job approval of 54% approve and 41% disapprove, you can see a certain amount of polarization (most of which still works to the Republicans advantage). Ninety-one percent (91%) of Republicans approve of the job the President is doing (73% strongly), and seventy-three percent of Democratic voters disapprove of the job the President is doing (65% strongly). That carries over to the generic presidential ballot where ninety-two percent (92%) of Republicans say they would vote for George W. Bush and eighty-four percent (84%) of Democrats would vote for the Democratic nominee.

The President, however, has a depth of connection with the voters that cannot be explained in one survey question. For example, if you compare the President's job approval ranking in relationship to how voters feel about the direction of the country, his ranking is historically high. (Only 39% of the respondents in this latest Battleground Poll feel that the country is going in the "right direction" – historically the presidential job approval would run within five-points of that measurement, not fifteen points ahead!)

In an effort to explore the depth of voters' feelings about George W. Bush, we asked voters if they personally approved of the President along with his job approval. What was found was that sixty-seven percent (67%) of the electorate approved of the President personally (47% strongly) and only twenty-five percent (25%) of voters disapproved of the President personally (18% strongly). [* a note of interest – Bill Clinton never broke 30% on his personal approval rating in the last four years of his presidency]

The combination of these two survey questions (job and personal approval) illustrates that the polarization of voters around the President is not as dramatic as "National Democrats" would have you believe! Fully fifty-two percent (52%) of voters are "consistent approvers" and approve of George W. Bush on both the job he is doing as President and approve of him personally. At the same time, only twenty-three percent (23%) consistently disapprove of the President on both measurements. Most importantly, there are 18% of voters who "drop-off" and approve of the President on one measurement but disapprove or are unsure on the second measurement. (15% of the 18% approve of George W. Bush personally.)

The results of the segmentation of these two questions go a long way in illustrating the depth of support for the President verses the myth of voters' polarization perpetuated by the Democrats. It also highlights the opportunity for George W. Bush to even build on his current job approval numbers as Iraq is stabilized, the war on terrorism continues to chalk up victories, and the economy improves. After all, one of the basic tenants of politics is that voters are much more likely to listen to your solutions if they like you personally and believe you have their best interests in mind.

Rather than a polarized electorate, this latest Battleground data shows that George W. Bush has a very solid base of support that is represented by a majority of voters, a solid core of opposition from approximately one out of four voters, and a target of opportunity with one out of every five voters for the two parties to define the glass as either half empty or half full!

Voters who show a higher propensity to “consistently approve” of George W. Bush are voters in the South Central region (70%), the Mountain States (60%), the Central Plains (57%) and the Midwest (54%). Voters in the South fall below the fifty percent consistent approval rate at forty-eight percent (48%), but are one of the highest groups of “drop-off” voters at twenty-one percent (21%).

Men are eight-points higher than their female counterparts in their consistent approval of the President at fifty-six percent (56%)! This high consistent approval rating runs strong with most male subgroups: working men (60%), White men (60%), especially younger White men (63%), married men (60%), Dads (64%), White married men (64%), White married men with children (71%), Born Again males (64%), NASCAR fan men (65%), and NASCAR men in suburbs (64%). As an exclamation point, Bush’s support amongst Republican men is near universal at ninety percent (90%) consistent approval and three percent (3%) consistent disapproval.

While women fall eight points behind men in their consistent approval of the President at forty-eight percent (48%), their consistent disapproval is only at twenty-six percent (26%) and there are several female subgroups that are highly supportive of the President. Women who have a higher propensity to consistently approve of the President are: women at home (56%), White women at home (60%), White working women (55%), White women (53%), married women (51%), White married women (57%), Moms (56%), White married women with children (64%), White married working Moms (62%), White suburban women (52%), NASCAR fan women (60%), and NASCAR Women in suburbs (60%).

While there is somewhat of a decline in consistent support level from these female subgroups from their male counterparts, that is not the case with Republican female voters who consistently approve of the President at eighty-seven percent (87%) and consistently disapprove of him at two percent (2%).

The list of groups that have a higher “consistent disapproval” rating of the President reads like a “Who’s Who of the Democratic Party’s” core base. Those having a higher propensity to consistently disapprove of the President are: Minority women (40%), African Americans (36%), especially African American women (42%), male Democrats (41%), female Democrats (45%), Conservative Democrats (35%), Moderate/Liberal

Democrats (48%), single voters (36%), voters who don't attend church (41%), and labor union households (38%).

One interesting note from this group is that while voters who believe the country is going in the wrong direction do consistently disapprove of the President at forty-one percent, another twenty-five percent (25%) of those voters fall into the "drop-off" category, perhaps explaining why George W. Bush's job approval rating is not impacted by the right direction/wrong track measurement as much as past Presidents.

Voters who show a higher propensity to be "drop-off" voters and by definition become a major target for both the Bush campaign and that of the eventual Democratic nominee are: voters in the South (21%), Central Plains (19%), and West (20%), Seniors (21%), Hispanics (29%) especially Hispanic men (33%), Independent voters (23%), Democratic Men (31%), and Conservative Democrats (25%).

Again, the results of the segmentation of these two questions go a long way in illustrating the depth of support for the President verses the myth of voters' polarization perpetuated by the Democrats.

Voter Mood about the Economy -- Voter Angst or Voter Anger?

Those of us who watch political polling over time knew one thing would hold true over the last year – that in a time of armed conflict, energy (and focus) is drained out of any other issue on the horizon and even dominates concern over a bad economy. It was also clear, if historical trends were true to form, that at some in time point voters would quickly shift from a focus on the war to a focus on the economy. In our December 1991 Battleground poll, thirty percent of American voters named the economy as the number one problem facing our country and twenty percent named jobs and the unemployment rate. Today, the number is reflective of that time period, as twenty-six percent of voters name the economy as the number one problem and seventeen percent name jobs and unemployment. It would appear that the voters shift to focusing on the economy has occurred. Now, the Democrats would want you to believe that this means voters are as angry now about the economy as they were during the 1991 recession. However this is rather short-sighted, as there is a considerable difference between the 1991 voter and the 2003 voter in their attitudes about the economy.

First and foremost, George W. Bush did not wait for that shift to occur. Even as plans for the conflict with Iraq were in their final stages, the President was laying the groundwork for his economic plan and beginning the process of moving his economic growth package through Congress. Unlike 1991, when George Bush saw the victories of the Gulf War quickly replaced with a growing recession, George W. Bush has his economic plan in place, and the economic numbers are all showing strong signs of improvement, with the exception of unemployment numbers which are a lagging indicator of an improving economy.

Are voters frustrated by the current economic situation? Absolutely. But this frustration leads to angst, not anger. Today's voters don't have the same deeply rooted resentment that voters facing the 1991 recession did. If they did, why would President Bush still be receiving a higher approval rating on handling the economy than the Democrats and hold a higher confidence level in keeping America prosperous?

Here's why: four in ten voters say the economy is just fair -- not poor, not excellent, just fair. And, forty-two percent of voters are somewhat confident about their family's economic future. These are not the feelings of an angry populous. In fact, ninety-two percent (92%) of those voters who feel the economy is either excellent or good are consistent in their approval of the President; and of the forty-two percent that feel the economy is just fair, fifty-seven percent (57%) are consistent approvers of the President both personally and on his job performance.

Furthermore, when voters are asked a more specific question about the economy, twenty-six percent (26%) of voters say the economy is growing or in a recovery period; and another twenty-six percent (26%) say we are growing, but simply not enough. This can be compared to twenty-two percent (22%) saying we are slightly on a downside, and twenty-five percent (25%) feeling we are approaching or are in a recession period. Again, these results do not show a great deal of anger or blame pointed towards the President when compared with his approval ratings. With the twenty-six percent of the electorate who show optimism about the economy, ninety-two percent (92%) are consistent approvers of the President personally and of the job he is doing. Of the forty-eight percent of voters who are somewhat ambivalent about the economy (26% economy is growing but not enough and 22% slightly on the downside), fifty percent (50%) consistently approve of the President and only twenty-one percent (21%) consistently disapprove. It is only with the twenty-five percent of voters who are pessimistic about

the economy where George W. Bush has a high level of consistent disapprovers (46% consistently disapprove both in the job he is doing as President and disapprove of him personally). These are not daunting figures or even dark clouds on the horizon for the Bush Campaign; they are ratings of concern.

Yes, the effects of 9/11 on the Stock Market, the recent rise of the unemployment rate, and the rising cost of health care have people feeling the effects of the economy on their pocketbooks. Thirty-eight percent of voters feel the economy is worse off than it was a year ago. Yet, twenty-five percent of voters feel our nation's economy is better off than it was a year ago (86% consistent approvers of the President), and thirty-six percent say it is about the same (63% consistent approvers of the President).

While there is concern over our current economic situation, voters are fairly optimistic that the nation's economy will improve within the next year. Thirty-nine percent of voters say the economy will be better off a year from now (82% consistent approvers of the President), while only eighteen percent feel we will be worse off. And, three in ten voters feel we will be about the same economically (39% consistent approvers of the President). These figures show sentiments of optimism, not anger.

In fact, voters seem optimistic about their own financial situations. The majority of voters feel they are about the same financially as they were a year ago, and twenty percent say they are better off. Only a little less than a third say they are worse off. Thirty-three percent of voters say their family's economic situation will be better off a year from now, while only thirteen percent say it will be worse. This is an improvement from twelve years ago when voters were split with twenty-two percent saying their family's economic situation would be better off and twenty-four percent saying worse off.

Voters who are "double optimists" about their family being better off (both compared to a year ago and projecting a year from now) are extremely high in their consistent approval of George W. Bush (90% consistently approve). However, the bulk of voters (78%), either felt their personal financial situation was the same on both measurements or were mixed in their responses. And yet, even with these voters who feel they will be the same financially, fifty-three percent (53%) consistently approve of the President on the job he is doing and approve of him personally.

Additionally, when asked about their family's economic future, thirty-eight percent say they are extremely or very confident about their family's economic future (74% consistent approvers of the President), while only nineteen percent show little or no confidence at all. So, it would appear that while there is some voter *angst* over the economy, it is far from *anger*.

One sign that George W. Bush has been able to hold support among voters against uncertain economic news, is this depth of connection with the voters across multiple income groups. The President maintains a fifty-four percent (54%) consistent approval rating with those making between \$30,000 and \$50,000 (22% of the electorate), \$50,000 - \$75,000 (20% of the electorate), and those with a family income over \$75,000 (24% of the electorate). It is only with those voters who fall below \$30,000 in annual income (23% of the electorate) that the President drops below a fifty percent consistent approval level (45% are consistent approvers – 27% consistent disapprovers).

There is one very dark cloud on the horizon for the Bush Administration and the Bush Campaign. When asked in an open-ended format to name what they would expect to see if the country's economic situation was improving, sixty-one percent mention the unemployment rate dropping and more people being employed. This rises to sixty-six percent among voters who have been out of work this past year and seventy-one percent among voters who have had a family member out of work. Because an improvement in the unemployment rate is a lagging indicator of an improving economy, then credit for the proactive stance George W. Bush took on the economy may also be a lagging indicator.

Conclusion

Now, the question remains – will the results of the 2004 presidential election result in a “forty-nine percent” election return, or will one of the candidates receive over fifty percent on Election Day?

The answer lies in watching the “drop-off” voters discussed in this analysis. As stated previously, eighteen percent of voters in this survey make up the “drop-off” set of voters – meaning they approve of the President on either his personal or his job approval rating, but they are either unsure or disapprove on the other measurement. Of the total eighteen percent who are “drop-off” voters, fifteen percent approve of the President personally,

but disapprove or are unsure of his job performance. These voters will be the ones to largely determine whether the 2004 presidential election becomes a forty-nine percent race, which would in part continue our reputation as being a “Forty-Nine Percent Nation.”

The groups of voters who are more apt to approve of the President personally, but drop-off on his job performance rating are voters in the South (18%), seniors (19%), African American voters (22%), Hispanic voters (22%), Female Independent voters (22%), Conservative Democrats (24%), and Moderate/Liberal Democrats (22%). These groups of voters as a whole have the potential to determine whether we continue our “Forty-Nine Percent Nation” status.

Now, with that said, the Fall leading up to the presidential election year often times can be one of the roughest times for an incumbent President, and in many way, it is rougher than the Fall campaign a year later.

During this time period, the opposition party usually has a group of potential presidential candidates hammering away at the incumbent. Those challengers have the luxury of being in a time period where they can criticize what they do not like while taking no accountability for their own proposals – that time will end when they have a nominee. It is also a phase of the campaign when the incumbent is organizing and collecting resources, but little response is given to the onslaught of attacks from those who want to be president. This is smart politics for two reasons: 1) there is no need to answer each and every attack from the opposition (better to focus on the nominee when there can be a certain amount of accountability for what they said/proposed in the early campaign season), and 2) the lack of a response usually causes a feeding frenzy amongst the opposition’s presidential candidates, they get more bold, and they often say stupid things! Patience is the key for the incumbent. In the last twenty-five years, every incumbent President running for re-election has been behind in a Fall survey a year out from the election. This is the time for the President to keep his focus on his job, not on trying to win an election over a year away. George W. Bush understands that!