

The Battleground 2006

October 2005

Democratic Strategic Analysis

by Celinda Lake, Daniel Gotoff, and Erica Prosser

Voters are deeply dissatisfied with the direction of the country under President Bush and the Republican Congress. If Democrats are able to position themselves as the party of reform, both economic and political, voters could very well turn 2006 into a quintessential “6-Year Itch” election.

Americans are growing increasingly disillusioned by, and distrustful of, their government. They are upset about a war which they now believe was a mistake, and from which they see no exit strategy. Everyday, they are facing the twin hardships of a rising cost of living and stagnating wages, with little to be optimistic about for either themselves, or their children, in the future. And they are now concluding that their advocates in Washington – the political leadership of this country – are incompetent, self-serving, and are only acting for political gain. These feelings have been germinating for some time but have only begun to come to fruition over the course of this year. This dynamic could easily culminate in a desire to ‘clean house’ and bring in new leadership to put the country back on the right track.

In a break from the last two election cycles, Republican candidates for Congress and Senate will not be able to rely on the coattails of their President. Moreover coattails are often stronger in off-year than in on-year elections when people cannot get at the President. For the first time in his presidency, voters are net-negative towards Bush, not only in terms of his job performance, but also in how they view him personally. The more he tries to staunch the tide of bad news on Iraq, the economy, and swirling scandals, the more he hurts himself and those around him. Voters are indeed picking up on Bush’s attempts to advance his policy agenda – and it is only making them feel more negative toward him. Democrats need to nationalize the election to create the kind of negative coattails that are possible this year. Voters are not in the mood to send the President “his team” or “his agenda.” Voters do not want to stay this course.

But in an environment where voter distrust in government is reaching a new high, Democrats have yet to be able to claim the mantle of change, even as the party decidedly out of power. Democrats lead on cleaning up corruption and government, but it is not a substantial enough lead given the level of Republican control in Washington. Despite Democrats’ advantages on a host of economic issues and key leadership dimensions, and Republicans’ glaring weaknesses as stewards of this country, electoral support for the two Parties remains closely competitive. In short, Democrats are not yet translating their strengths into ballot support. Democrats lead on the generic Congressional ballot, but by a narrow 5-point margin. In order to put themselves in a winning position, Democrats must drive a strong agenda heading into

2006 that focuses on both economic and political reform. Democrats have yet to fill the void.

And voters' worries are only likely to increase as scandals unfold, spending on the war continues, gas and energy prices spike, and the bills for rebuilding the Gulf States mount. But voters' priorities for offsetting the cost of Katrina are telling. They concentrate on three areas of potential revenue, all of which offer Democrats a unique opportunity to position themselves positively, forcefully, and in stark contrast to the Republicans. One avenue allows the Democrats to stand up for the middle class by asking for more of the wealthy in these tough economic times. A second allows the Democrats to claim the mantle of reform by positioning themselves as cutting pork. A third avenue allows Democrats (finally) to take a strong position on the war that is completely in sync with voters' priorities. Solid majorities of voters support the following proposals, with intense support at or near 50 percent.¹

Democrats should note that these solutions present them with the basis of a national agenda that combines strong elements of economic populism and political reform, while not ceding to the opposition the most pressing issue of the day—Iraq. Energy and gas prices and health care costs allow us to join the themes of economic and political reform.

Democrats should be cautioned that they remain vulnerable on national defense and fighting terrorism. Voters continue to afford the Republicans strong advantages on security and, as we have seen in races in the last two cycles, this issue can be used to swing a race. Democrats will have to articulate an alternative view on security to help neutralize Republican advantages on security in order to capitalize on their agenda of reform and the economy and to ensure victory.

¹ The question testing the withdrawal of troops from Iraq was paid for by Lake Research Partners.

Pessimism Abounds-Voters Only Growing More Negative Under Republican Control of Government

Direction of the Country

Pessimism over the direction of the country and the economy has increased over the course of this year and reached all time high. And, unlike in the past, this negativity is pervasive and not seen as a temporary downturn. In fact, voters only anticipate the situation getting worse for the next generation. Moreover, unlike the fall of 2004, voters do not see the President as part of the solution.

Two-thirds (66%) of voters say the country is off on the wrong track with a majority strongly agreeing (54%), while just over one-quarter (28%) says things are headed in the right direction. This is a 23-point net increase in negativity since our last Battleground survey in March (54% wrong track, 39% right direction) and **is the most negative voters have been since this president took office. No demographic group, besides Republicans, is positive about the direction of the country.**

This negativity about the direction of the country cuts across all demographic groups, and in fact Republicans are the only group that are not net negative about the direction of the country (+21). Democrats (-90) and independents (-59) remain strongly pessimistic. Voters undoubtedly associate this downturn with government and those in power as perceptions of Bush and the Republican are solidly negative among those voters who believe the country is off on the wrong track. This should be a concern for the Republicans. Many of their traditional base groups as well as their targets are decidedly negative about the direction of the country. Among those voter groups are Southern voters (63% wrong track), those in states Bush won by 55% or more (60%), those who identify as conservatives (51%), Hispanics (82%), independents (74%), married women (60%), Catholics (67%), born-again/evangelicals (60%), and rural voters (65%).

Looking ahead to the mid-term elections, voters are dissatisfied and that sets the scene for a six-year itch. Sixty-eight percent of voters who are undecided on the generic Congressional ballot are negative about the direction of the country, including half (50%) who are strongly negative.

The Economy

Voters overwhelmingly think the economy is in bad shape. While they have recognized the impact on their own pocketbooks for some time, now they are starting to see how it will negatively affect their children's futures. Sixty-eight percent of voters say the current state of the economy is just fair or poor. This is up 9% since March and is the most negative voters have been since September of 2003 (76% just fair/poor). Less than one-third (32%) say the economy is in a good or excellent shape, with just 5% rating it excellent.

Stagnation dominates people's views with many precariously close to doing worse. A majority (55%) of voters feels their economic status has not changed in the past year, while one-fourth (25%) think it has declined and just 19% think it has improved. Similar to their feelings on the economy in general, only Republicans (+18) feel that their situation has improved over the last year, while Democrats (-27) and independents (-13) see their economic status as having declined over the past year. However, majorities in all parties have not seen much change in their economic condition. Voters who are undecided in the 2006 Congressional elections tend to feel their situations have remained fairly constant as well (61%), however those who have seen change are more likely to say they are worse off (23%) than better off (16%).

Looking ahead, voters are not optimistic about the economy turning around in the next six months. Sixty-seven percent of voters expect the economy to be just fair or poor in six months from now, while just less than one-third (32%) continues to think it will be good or excellent (3%). Again, not one single demographic group is positive about the economy in the next six months and even base groups like evangelicals (-27), rural voters (-37), white men (-25), and southerners (-27) are net negative.

As the cost of living continues to increase and wages continue to stagnate, pessimism about the economy rebounding has steadily grown, most significantly this year. Voters are 35-points net negative about what condition the economy will be in six months from now. This is up from just 8-points net negative in March and 1-point and 4-points net positive last August and June respectively.

More personally, voters do not see their own economic situations improving over the coming year. A strong majority (63%) expects their economic status to be about the same in a year from now as it is now, while another 18% foresee their situation declining even more. Just 19% are optimistic that their economic status will improve over the coming year.

And in a stunning shift, voters do not have positive expectations for their children's economic future either. The current generation does not expect their children to be better off financially than they themselves are. This was a dynamic that bode ill for Bush's father (and other Republicans) back in 1992. Just 19% of the electorate expect the next generation to improve on their economic status. Most think they will be stagnant. Only 16% of non-college and 19% of college educated voters believe their children will do better. The combination of these factors plays heavily into their pessimism about the direction of the country and is a strong catalyst in voters' desire for change.

Katrina's Added Effect

The state of the national economy was precarious in voters' minds even before the hurricanes. Now, post-Katrina, voters fear economic conditions will worsen. Americans worry about spending and our national economic resources being spread thin with the added expenses of the war and clean-up and recovery in the Gulf States.

The handling of Katrina added to the public distrust of government at all levels and compounded economic worries. Nearly 6-in-10 voters (58%) give the federal government a failing grade on dealing with Hurricane Katrina and more than three-quarters (78%) are negative about the response of state and local government. These factors lead to an overall dissatisfaction with government across the board and further any distrust of the institution. From a political perspective, it has only further diminished the coattails of this President. In fact, 53% of voters say the response to the hurricane has caused them to have a less favorable view of Bush's leadership. That includes 58% of independents and 49% of undecided voters.

The heightened sense of pessimism about the economy makes voters even more sensitive to the costs of recovery and where the money is coming from. Half (50%) of voters say that increasing the deficit is not an option when looking at how to fund recovery—that instead we must make cuts in federal spending or increase taxes. This, added to the 6% who say we can neither make cuts nor increase the deficit to pay for recovery, creates a clear majority against creating a larger federal budget deficit.

Given options on how to fund the recovery, voters look first to solutions that would decrease spending while protecting the middle and lower classes and seniors. Nearly three-quarters of voters favor removing items from the recent highway funding bill that are not directly related to road construction as a way to fund the recovery. Voters are well aware of pork-barrel projects in the bill and see them as a waste of federal money. There is an ability to tie corruption and cronyism to specific consequences for the nation, in a way that has been missing in the past. This solution is followed by increasing taxes on those making over \$200,000 a year (68% favor) and significantly reducing troops in Iraq with a plan for withdrawal (63%) rounding out the top tier of proposed solutions.

Americans are strongly against solutions that would hurt working Americans when other, clearer options are available. Sixty-one percent of voters oppose suspending the implementation of the Medicare prescription drug benefit as a solution even though the program gets mixed reviews, while a majority (50%) opposes running a federal budget deficit. **Democrats should take notice that voters solidly support populist, reform-minded solutions and use that in formulating a platform for change.**

Overwhelming Dissatisfaction With Government and the Republicans in Power

Bush's Diminishing Coattails and Credit

For the first time in his Presidency, voters are net-negative on the President both personally and in terms of the job he is doing. Republicans in the mid-term elections are not likely to be able to ride the President's coattails and, if circumstances continue in their current vein, may have to deal with backlash from their connection to this President.

As we have seen in public polls over recent months, Bush is experiencing the lowest favorability ratings of his Presidency and for the first time in our Battleground polls the electorate has a net negative impression of him (46 percent favorable, 53 percent unfavorable). His negatives have increased 10-points since March as frustrations with the situation in Iraq, the response to the hurricanes, and scandals surrounding his administration and his party have become more prevalent. Voters approve of the President personally, but even that is at its lowest level since he took office. Among Independents the President's personal favorability is 37% to 60% unfavorable and his job performance is 30% positive to 64% negative. Among undecided voters in the generic Congressional his favorability is 45% to 49% unfavorable and his job performance is 39% positive to 54% negative.

In the midst of these debacles, Bush's efforts to advance his policy agenda are only causing him further damage. Voters are well aware of the policies being advanced by the President and his administration (82 percent have seen, read, or heard about his policies recently) and they do not like them. Sixty percent of voters who are aware of recent policies put forward say they have caused them to be less favorable towards Bush. Just half that number (30%) says these policies have increased their favorability towards the President, though this number is being driven by Republicans – 60% of whom say they are more favorable towards Bush after hearing recent policies. However, both Democrats (93% less favorable) and independents (70%) are strongly moved against Bush by these policies. Further evidence that Bush is becoming a liability for his party is the fact that 66% of undecided voters who are aware of Bush's agenda are less favorable towards him as a result.

Blame Extends to Congressional Republicans

Voters' dissatisfaction and distrust of government extends beyond the President and his administration to the Congress and those in power more broadly. Voters are net negative in their opinion of Republicans in Congress (-3). This is a somewhat dramatic turnaround from the beginning of the year when they were 10-points net positive towards Congressional Republicans. Voters do not strongly differentiate between those in office and the national Republican party as evidenced by their turnaround from a net positive view of the party (50% to 41%) to a net negative one (45% to 49%) since March.

Americans are also increasingly aware of government scandals including that of former Majority Leader Tom DeLay. Unlike some past Congressional scandals, the majority of the public is aware of DeLay's recent indictments (just 16% have never heard of him). By a more than 2-to-1 margin (46% to 21%) voters are unfavorable towards DeLay.

This awareness gives Democrats an opportunity to use the corruption charges being laid against various Republicans, namely DeLay, Rove, Libby, and Frist, to present themselves as the party that will clean up Washington. However,

Democrats should be cautioned that voters do not currently see them as removed from the corruption and it will take a strong effort to place themselves in a position where they can take advantage of repeated Republican missteps. In fact, among undecided voters a whopping 49% volunteer that neither party is good on ending corruption in Washington. Moreover, voters overall give the Congressional Democrats ratings of only 47% to 42%-- better than the Republicans but not overwhelmingly. Among undecideds the Republicans are 37% favorable and 43% unfavorable while Democrats are 30% favorable and 44% unfavorable. The Democrats have to establish a profile on the economy and reform to win these voters. Energy and gas prices and health care costs (the top 2 economic issues) provide a great opportunity to join the two.

Voters Trust Democrats More than Republicans, but There is Still Work to be Done

The Generic Ballot

Despite growing disapproval of the President and Republicans in Congress, **Democrats hold a narrow 5-point lead on the generic Congressional ballot.** Neither party currently garners a majority in the head-to-head (46% Democrat, 41% Republican, 13% undecided).

Democrats strongest support comes from traditional base groups though potential among target groups is also evident. Those who are most likely to support the Democrat include those in states Kerry won by 55% or more (51%), African Americans (85%), Latinos (58%), liberals (82%), single voters (63%), union households (62%), urban voters (53%), and Catholics (52%).

In a reversal from last cycle, Democratic support is slightly more consolidated than Republican support. Republicans support their candidate, 87 percent to 4 percent, with 9 percent undecided. Democrats back the Democratic candidate, 90 percent to 2 percent, with 8 percent undecided. For once, Democrats are also as energized as Republicans—66% of Democrats and 64% of Republicans say they are extremely likely to vote. Noticeably only 63% of born again Christians say they are extremely likely to vote, perhaps foreshadowing some turnout problems for the Republicans. The targeted independent voters favor the Democratic candidate over the Republican by 18-points (40 percent to 22 percent, with 39 percent undecided) if this early trend continues look for some upsets coming out of 2006.

Women continue to support the Democratic candidate by 10-points, however men are evenly split on the generic ballot (44% each). The marriage gap is even greater. Married voters support the Republican candidate by 8-points while unmarried voters are strongly behind the Democratic candidate (35-points).

Democrats vs. Republicans on the Issues

Despite Democrats' advantages on a host of economic issues and key leadership dimensions, and Republicans' glaring weaknesses as stewards of this country, electoral support for the two Parties remains closely competitive. In short, Democrats are not yet fully translating their strengths into ballot support. In order to put themselves in a winning position, Democrats must drive a strong agenda heading into 2006 that focuses on economic and political reform.

Voters trust Democrats more on domestic issues, but still look to Republicans when it comes to the war in Iraq and homeland security. Voters trust Democrats more than Bush or Republicans on setting the right priorities and ending corruption in government, both of which should be strong potential frames for Democratic candidates in 2006. Democrats in Congress are also afforded an advantage over their Republican counterparts on a number of key issues including strengthening Social Security (+27), creating jobs (+17), making prescription drugs affordable (+35), improving education (+18), holding down federal spending (+14), and being for the middle class (+26). However, we are at a strong disadvantage on security-based issues including safeguarding from terrorism (-20), though voters are split on the war in Iraq (-1), which is currently at the top of voters concerns.

So long as Republicans hold the levers of power and such a dominant advantage on national security, Democrats remain vulnerable, regardless of how much more they are trusted to manage the economy and other domestic issues. Voters give Republicans strong advantages on the security related issues including a 20-point margin on safeguarding America from a terrorist threat and a 15-point margin on homeland security. Democrats do narrow the margin on Republicans, on the issue of the war (1-point), however this may in part be attributed to voters' belief that Congress has little to do with the policy on the war.

One note should embolden Democrats. They are remarkably competitive with Republicans on holding the line on taxes (Democrats trail Republicans by only 8-points). Moreover, Democrats do hold an advantage on the usual Republican stronghold of holding down federal spending (Democrats have a 14-point advantage over Republicans).

It should be noted as well, that while Bush has little to no positive coattails and is viewed increasingly negatively he still holds a slightly stronger advantage than Congressional Republicans on many of the issue comparisons versus Democrats—most notably on education (+7-points stronger), ending corruption in Washington (+6), keeping down the cost of prescription drugs (+6), and on the war in Iraq (+5). That makes Democrats even stronger in the 2006 electoral contests. Noticeably, independents gave Democrats an advantage over Republicans in Congress on prescription drugs (+49), keeping America prosperous (+29), improving education (+22), holding down federal spending (+16), Social Security (+30), jobs (+25), sharing our values (+15), protecting the middle class (+38), setting the right priorities (+23), ending corruption in Washington

(+8), and on the war in Iraq (+14). Holding the line on taxes (-17) and safeguarding from terrorism (-3) are the only negative ratings among independents.