

The Battleground 2006

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Democratic Strategic Analysis

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As dissatisfaction with the President and Republican-led Congress grows, voters are poised to affect sweeping change. The “sixth year itch”, where voters turn out the party in power in large numbers, is by no means a new phenomenon; only Bill Clinton, in the history of modern campaigns, avoided his party losing seats in the mid-term elections of his second term. Today, Republicans’ failures, especially when they control all the branches of government, suggest the potential for a historical trend will continue in 2006. Importantly, independent and undecided voters are noticeably negative in their assessments of Bush and the direction of the country.

Democrats currently have a modest 5-point advantage on the generic Congressional ballot. And unlike the last “off-year” elections in 2002, Democrats already hold clear advantages on the issues that are of top concern to the voters, including on the economy, health care, and jobs. Voters’ other pressing worry – Iraq – presents further opportunities for the Democrats to attract support as concerns over the war continue to intensify. Another important difference from 2002 is that this time Republicans will not benefit from any Presidential coattails; in fact, many are already attempting to distance themselves from Bush in recognition of his growing unpopularity.

Amid mounting news of scandals, including scandals that involve our national security, voters are expressing a desire for real change in Washington, D.C. Democrats stand to benefit by emphasizing that the corruption of our government is coming at a real cost to American families and to the country as a whole. But they also must establish themselves as the solution to the problems that concern voters. The political atmosphere argues for nationalizing the upcoming elections, casting the choice as a referendum on Bush and Republican stewardship of the country and using “change” as a wedge issue.

One of the most important fights in the 2006 elections will be for control of the agenda. Republicans clearly want to centralize this election around security because of their continued advantage on the issue though recent events have tarnished that. In order to make real gains Democrats must at least neutralize the issue. Democrats should put resources into establishing their credentials on security, while emphasizing Republican failures. To this end, the issue over port security should be the start of a frank dialogue on national and homeland security policy, not an isolated news story.

This formula – capitalizing on the current political atmosphere, presenting a real alternative to the status quo of costly corruption, and neutralizing the security issue while harnessing their strengths on domestic issues – has the potential to give the Democrats big gains.

The Mood of the Electorate: Setting the Stage for Change

Voters continue to be dissatisfied with the direction the country is headed, setting the stage for change. Sixty percent of voters say they think the country is off on the right track, with nearly one-half (49 percent) saying they feel so strongly. Less than one-third (31 percent) say the country is headed in the right direction.

This dissatisfaction is pervasive across voter groups including those that would usually be considered safe for the Republicans. Fifty-eight percent of voters in states won by Bush by 55 percent or more and 60 percent of voters in states with two Republican Senators say they think the country is off on the wrong track. Also of concern for the Republicans should be the level of dissatisfaction in Congressional Districts safely won by Bush (57 percent wrong track) and in districts currently held by Republicans (also 57 percent). These negative feelings are even more evident among critical swing voter groups—contested Presidential states (61 percent wrong track); those in states with mixed Senate delegations (56 percent); those in contested Congressional Districts (58 percent); independent voters (70 percent) and undecided voters in the Congressional election (62 percent).

The Players: Bush Has Become a Liability to Republican Candidates on the Trail

Republican candidates will not be able to rely on the President or his administration's coattails and in fact may be hurt by them. Republicans will attempt to distance themselves from their national leaders to avoid being perceived as part of the problem.

Fifty-three percent of voters have an unfavorable impression of President Bush (43 percent strongly) and his job approval ratings continue to deteriorate—53 percent negative (45 percent strongly negative). In a poll where 42 percent of the voters identify as Republicans only 30 percent strongly approve of the job the President is doing. Similarly, voters have unfavorable impressions of Vice President Cheney (51 percent unfavorable, 39 percent strongly). This has to be of concern to Republican candidates, who must see these ratings, along with the general disapproval of Congress and Washington, and realize the potential for significant losses if this election becomes a referendum on Republican control.

At this time in the last mid-term elections Republican candidates had long coattails to ride from the President who, bolstered by the start of the war, had an 84 percent job approval rating that cut across demographic groups. **This time around, as the occupation intensifies into civil war and domestic concerns increase, the President's job approval is roughly half of what it was then (46 percent).** And only his base is propping him up. Bush continues to receive positive ratings from party loyalists – 86 percent among Republicans, 83 percent among straight ticket Republican voters, but noticeably only 67 percent among conservatives. Also noticeably, Reagan Democrats solidly disapprove of the job that Bush is doing (77 percent)

Battleground voters are far less impressed with Bush's job performance. Among independents, 63 percent disapprove; among voters in close 2004 Presidential states, 54 percent disapprove; among voters in contested Congressional districts, 50 percent disapprove; in the Midwest, 53 percent disapprove; among seniors, 50 percent disapprove; among ticket splitters, 68 percent disapprove; among moderates, 66 percent disapprove; and among undecided voters on the generic Congressional ballot, 53 percent disapprove.

Not surprisingly, Democratic base groups disapprove of the President's job performance even more strongly, including Democrats (88 percent disapprove), African-Americans (86 percent), 2004 Kerry voters (94 percent), and liberals (85 percent). Bush will be an important asset in Democratic GOTV efforts.

The 2006 Elections: Democrats Pulling Ahead

Democrats have a 5-point lead on the generic Congressional ballot (46 percent Democrat, 40 percent Republican, 14 percent undecided), despite even party identification in the poll. And Democrats have a slightly more consolidated base than Republicans, with 90 percent of Democrats saying they will vote for the Democrat than Republicans who have 83 percent of Republicans. This represents a shift from the last three elections.

Undecided voters. Fourteen percent of voters say they are undecided on the generic Congressional ballot. Those voter groups that remain the most undecided are moderates (42 percent), independents (37 percent), Central Plains voters (20 percent), younger men (19 percent), unmarried men (20 percent), and infrequent churchgoers (20 percent).

Republican Base. The Republican base is concentrated among their strongholds, though even in some of those they do not receive a majority. Their most solid support comes from voters in Mountain states (52 percent), the South (45 percent), older men (47 percent), rural white voters (48 percent), white married men (52 percent), conservatives (61 percent), frequent church-goers (52 percent)- including active Catholics (48 percent), Baptists (54 percent), Fundamentalist/ Pentecostals (46 percent), and born again/ evangelicals (46 percent).

Democratic Base. The Democratic base is becoming more solidified and several target voter groups are leaning Democratic as well. However, there is still room to grow. Those voter groups that are most solidly Democratic include: African Americans (82 percent), Hispanics (54 percent), single voters (67 percent), voters with no religious affiliation (62 percent), unmarried women (61 percent), urban voters (55 percent), voters in the West (53 percent), women (52 percent), and voters 18 to 34 years old (51 percent).

Turnout especially among African Americans and Latino voters is still an issue for the 2006 elections. While 64 percent of white conservative Christians say they are extremely likely to vote only 49 percent of African Americans and 47 percent of Hispanic voters are that sure.

Key Battlegrounds

Gender gap – The Democratic advantage, in part, comes from the gender gap. Women are 11-points Democratic in party identification while men continue to favor the Republican Party (by 12-points). However, while women out-perform party identification for the Democrat on the generic Congressional ballot (+16), men under-perform party identification for the Republican (affording the Republican just a 7-point margin on the generic ballot). Democrats must continue to appeal to men while broadening support among women. The gender gap extends to every group of women, including married and unmarried women (+5 Democratic and +31, respectively) and college educated and non-college educated women (+12 and +25, respectively).

Seniors – Once a core Democratic constituency, seniors have become a swing group and are divided on the ballot this year as well, giving only a slight advantage to the Democrat (+2). Democrats have an opportunity to expand on this margin by using their advantage among seniors on both Social Security (+30) and prescription drugs (+22). Improving the margins among a constituency that is only growing and that shows up disproportionately in non-presidential election years is essential for Democrats, both in this cycle and beyond.

Democrats Gaining Ground on the Issues and on Dimensions of Leadership

Voters have a somewhat diffuse issue agenda with domestic concerns crowding the top of the list, though the war remains top of mind for many voters. Eleven percent of voters say the war in Iraq is the number one problem they are concerned about, however it is followed closely by a bevy of domestic issues including the economy (10 percent), health care (8 percent), and jobs (6 percent). The diffuse agenda makes it more difficult to define and nationalize the election.

In 2002 and 2004, even many dissatisfied voters saw Bush as the solution to their problems. That is decidedly not the case today. Overall, voters give Democrats an advantage on their top concerns, versus both the President (47 percent to 33 percent) and Republicans in Congress (42 percent to 33 percent). Independent voters give the Democrats a 32-point and 23-point advantage over Bush and the Republicans in Congress respectively.

The war continues to feed voters' desire for change. In fact, among those voters who cite the war as the most important problem, 62 percent believe that Democrats in Congress would do a better job solving the problem than President Bush and 68 percent believe that Democrats in Congress would do a better job than Republicans in Congress solving it. Overall voters divide on who would be better on Iraq, 45 percent say the Republicans and 42 percent side with the Democrats.

Democrats hold advantages on the other top issues as well. Among those who cite the economy as their most pressing concern, 51 percent and 43 percent, respectively,

believe that Democrats in Congress would be better at solving this problem (compared to 25 percent for Bush and 36 percent for Republicans in Congress). This is true even when the economy is combined with taxes, an issue that is traditionally a Republican stronghold. Democrats hold an even greater advantage among those who are most concerned about health care: 57 percent to 20 percent over the President, and 47 percent to 15 percent over Republicans in Congress.

When asked to rate the two parties on a host of specific issues, voters tend to afford Democrats wide advantages over Bush and Republicans in Congress. Voters see Democrats as better able to keep America prosperous (+8 and +3 respectively); improve education (+13 and +16); hold down federal spending (+18 and +12); strength Social Security (+21 and +27); and improve the economy (+12 versus both). The issues surrounding health care are strong for Democrats. Currently they hold advantages on both making prescription drugs affordable (+27 and +34) and dealing with health care (+25 and +30). This is a positive indication for the Democrats for both the 2006 and 2008 elections.

Bush and the Republicans in Congress hold only slight advantages over Democrats in Congress on the war in Iraq (+3 Bush, +3 Republicans) and holding the line on taxes (+2 Bush, +16 Republicans in Congress). The biggest advantage over Democrats for Bush and Republicans comes on safeguarding American from a terrorist threat (+17 Bush, +17 Republicans), though it should be noted that this survey was completed prior to the port security scandal.

Among independents the advantages for Democrats are strong on keeping America prosperous (+21 against Bush and +8 against Republicans in Congress), education (+23 and +37), holding down federal spending (+34 and +13), strengthening Social Security (+33 and +41), and improving the economy (+24 and +23). Independents split on the advantage on dealing with Iraq, giving the President a slight advantage over Democrats in Congress (2-points), but giving Democrats a 6-point advantage over their Republican counterparts in Congress. Republicans and Bush have a lead, among independents, on holding the line on taxes (5-points and 1-point) and on safeguarding America from a terrorist threat (23-points and 16-points).

Despite their strong advantages on the majority of issues, the gap on the security issue should serve as a red flag for Democrats. Democrats should not be fooled into believing they can shift the debate to domestic issues without first addressing national and homeland security. As demonstrated by the past two elections, these issues are simply too big to ignore. There is however, a strong ability to contest women on the security agenda. Women split on the security issue- 45 percent Republican advantage and 42 percent Democrat advantage.

Democrats can be encouraged by their advantages on various leadership dimensions as well. Republicans in Congress hold a 2-point advantage on “sharing your values”; however versus Bush the Democrats in Congress hold a 5-point advantage on values. On every other trait, voters view Democrats as stronger than either Bush or

Republicans in Congress, including: being for the middle class (+25 and +20 respectively) and setting the right priorities (+7 and +6).

The Reform Agenda and Voters' Desire for Dramatic Change

As scandals continue to emanate from the nation's capitol, voters see Democrats as better prepared to tackle the culture of corruption in Washington. Voters give Democrats a 19-point advantage on changing the tone in Washington against Bush and a 20-point advantage versus the Republicans in Congress. Similarly they are seen as better on both bringing about change (+18 and +22 respectively) and cracking down on corruption in Washington (+13 and +10 respectively).

This advantage is particularly strong among the base but extends to swing groups as well. Voters see Democrats as better than Republicans when it comes to cracking down on corruption among Midwest voters (+15), those in contested 2004 states (+13), voters in contested Congressional Districts from 2004 (+22), independents (+21), unmarried women (+33), and among those undecided on the generic Congressional ballot (+17). Democrats must build on this and present real plans to effect change.

Voters are clearly looking for a change and Democrats have the opportunity to offer sweeping reform. More than one-third (36 percent) of voters think the problems are so great that reforms alone will not work and that an influx of new members of Congress is needed. Those voter groups most likely to cite the need for change include seniors (41 percent), African Americans (45 percent), voters in the Midwest (42 percent) and Central Plains (53 percent), and independents (43 percent).

While emphasizing the need for change, Democrats need to be aware that voters do not place the blame for the corruption entirely on Republicans. In fact, many voters see this endemic in our government, and as such it, pervades both parties. Nearly two-thirds (64 percent) of voters say that the blame lies with both parties equally. However among those voters who do put the blame on one party 20 percent say it is Republicans who are the cause and just 11 percent say it is Democrats. It should be noted that those most likely to lay blame with one party are stronger partisans. Democrats still have work to do in defining the nature of the corruption as uniquely Republican. The theme of the cost of corruption illustrated by the drug plan and energy bill are powerful ways to increase the Democratic advantage.

The challenge will be to present a plan of reform that voters will recognize as real, positive change. Faced with a number of proposals, voters heavily favor reforms that would bring about more openness and disclosure in Washington. However, **every** reform tested is supported by majorities of voters, the least favored still garnering 59 percent support. The best testing reforms included public disclosure of lobbyists' clients and contacts with lawmakers.

Eighty-seven percent of voters (69 percent strongly) favor making members of Congress disclose any contact with lobbyists within 48 hours and requiring them to

disclose any contributions over \$1,000 in the same time period. Just 10 percent oppose this reform. The second best testing reform has a similar theme: requiring all lobbyists to register a list of their clients with Congress and making this list available for public searches. It would also require them to make any contacts with a member of Congress or their staff public within 48 hours (86 percent favor, 70 percent strongly). A proposal banning all gifts to members of Congress from lobbyists or organizations supported by lobbyists is also popular (79 percent favor, 65 percent strongly).

Perceptions of Congress Continue to Spiral

A warning to both parties-- voters have an even more negative view of Congress' job performance than they do of the President's (37 percent approve, 56 percent disapprove- 38 percent strongly). Independents and Democrats are particularly negative about Congress (64 percent and 69 percent disapprove respectively). Though when asked about their own member of Congress voters are more positive (62 percent approve, 25 percent disapprove). Negative feelings about Congress are not centered on either party. The Democrats in Congress are seen as just one-point net positive and the Republicans are seen as four points net negative by voters. This is a sign of the polarization that currently suffuses the country but should also serve as a clarion call to all incumbents who may be reminded of a similar mood before the 1994 elections.

There is an overwhelming feeling that Congress is more concerned about partisan politics than those they represent. Ninety-two percent of voters think lawmakers in Washington put partisan politics first, 84 percent feel so strongly. This feeling is pervasive across voter groups particularly among voters in the Mountain states (95 percent), 2004 Battleground states (93 percent), those states with mixed Senate delegations (95 percent), independents (93 percent), and Democrats (93 percent). All of these are key groups for either persuasion or turnout if the Democrats are going to bring about a change in seats.