

The Battleground 2006

March 2005

Democratic Strategic Analysis

by Celinda Lake, Daniel Gotoff, and Erica Prosser

While George W. Bush has succeeded in turning the national focus to the issue of Social Security reform he has been decidedly unsuccessful at convincing the American voters of the virtues of privatization. Despite political scare tactics and dire forecasts voters are not willing to accept the President's created 'crisis' in Social Security. While Americans clearly see the need for strengthening Social Security with minor to modest changes, they are not willing to risk the successful safety net for the nation's seniors on a radical scheme of privatization.

Bringing the national focus to this issue presents additional problems for the President and his party. Bush has turned voters' attention back to domestic, pocketbook issues on which he has little credibility. Republican Congressional representatives should be concerned that the President's agenda is turning the spotlight to issues that highlight Republican platform weaknesses.

The American public has strong apprehensions about the direction of the country. Domestic issues currently top the agenda for voters—not terrorism or the costly occupation of Iraq. And while the Republicans hold an advantage on security issues, voters afford Democrats strong advantages on such key domestic issues as creating jobs, improving education, and making prescription drugs affordable. When it comes to protecting the middle class, a majority of Americans still trust Democrats over Republicans.

Democrats must maintain their strong advantage on these dimensions by presenting solutions of their own and continuing to spotlight the Republican's failures. But while Democrats cannot allow Republicans to co-opt these traditional party strongholds, it is equally – if not more – important that Democrats address their disadvantage on prosperity and a broader economic view. Democrats need to use the Social Security fight to begin a broader dialogue filling in what we stand for and what our economic vision for America is.

Social Security – Majorities Oppose Privatization

In a sense, George W. Bush has gotten what he wanted. Privatization of Social Security is at the forefront of the national agenda. But that does not mean people have to like it – they don't. In their own words, they describe their serious reservations about privatization.

“What our friend Mr. Bush is doing is wiping out the middle class and pretty much wiping much of the New Deal legislation out that has been in existence for the past 70 years.” Northeast man

“I just don't think we should be privatizing Social Security.” Northeast woman

“I think it is on account of the President we have. He is the one who is changing everything. Social Security—he wants to change the whole thing. It needs some reform, but I don't think it should change the way people do it.” Midwest man

“The fact they are trying to privatize Social Security and I don't think that's necessary, we have several years to talk. Health care is more of a crisis and should be a priority.” Midwest man

“How are people going to invest in their own Social Security when they don't have any money market skills?” Southern man

“I have a real good idea for the President. What he should do is, he can solve the Social Security problems by drafting us old people, and send us to Iraq, and then if we get killed the Social Security problems would be solved. It is sorta a joke, but I'm serious.” Southern senior man

“I think they should leave (Social Security) alone.” Central Plains woman

“They're talking about meddling with Social Security. I don't think they should, not they way they are talking about.” Western woman

“I don't think privatizing Social Security is the answer to fixing it, something else needs to be done” Northeast woman.

“Don't mess with Social Security.” Central Plains man

“I think what Bush is trying to do with Social Security is frightening. I don't like the plan.” Western woman

Since the 2004 election Bush and his administration have been successful in making Social Security a top of mind concern for Americans. In fact, when asked about the number one concern that the President and Congress should be addressing, a plurality of voters cites Social Security (17 percent). More than twice as many voters

volunteer Social Security as any of the second-tier concerns, including the economy (8 percent), health care (8 percent), even terrorism (6 percent), and the war in Iraq (5 percent). Among senior white women 24 percent say Social Security is their top issue.

However, despite successfully moving the issue to the forefront (86 percent have seen, read, or heard about the President's plan to privatize Social Security), the President and his Administration have not been able to convince voters that Social Security is currently in "crisis" or that it is in need of dramatic change.

While two-thirds of voters believe Social Security does have problems, just 29 percent say the future security of the system is poor (40 percent say it is 'not so good'). Nearly as many, 27 percent, say the future financial security of Social Security is excellent or good.

Because they do not believe the system is in crisis, voters are not accepting Bush's prescription for a complete overhaul. In fact, 60 percent of voters say the system is in need of modest changes (38 percent), minor changes (20 percent), or no changes at all (2 percent). Just 38 percent say it is in need of major changes.

And while voters believe that some level of change needs to be made to protect Social Security, a majority opposes private accounts—no matter how they are described. When asked about the privatization of Social Security 60 percent of voters say they oppose the plan with less than one-third saying they support the plan (32 percent support and 9 percent are unsure). Even when the administration's preferred terminology is used ('Personal Retirement Accounts'), a majority of voters (53 percent) still opposes the plan. Just 37 percent support it and 10 percent are unsure.

Consensus is broad. Voters across the country are opposed to privatizing Social Security. Regionally, this includes majorities of voters in the Northeast (72 percent), Midwest (70 percent), Central Plains (52 percent), the West (67 percent), and even in the Republican stronghold of the South (52 percent). In states that Kerry won in 2004 by over 55 percent an overwhelming majority oppose privatization (77 percent). This is also true in the battleground states (62 percent)¹. In fact, even in the states that Bush won by 55 percent or more a plurality of voters opposes privatization (46 percent to 41 percent).

Opposition to privatization is stronger among women (64 percent oppose), however a majority of men (54 percent) opposes it as well. Contrary to conventional wisdom, majorities of all age groups also oppose the plan, including notably younger voters. Seniors are the most strongly opposed (61 percent of those 65 and older), followed by pre-retirement voters (59 percent of those 45-64), those 35 to 44 (56 percent oppose), and the youngest voters (57 percent of those 18 to 34 oppose the plan). A majority of voters across races is also opposed to the plan, with minority voters being the most opposed. Fully 79 percent of African Americans and 71 percent of Hispanics oppose privatization, compared to 56 percent of white voters. Also a whopping 73 percent of unmarried women oppose privatization. There is a noticeable marriage gap, both a majority of married (54 percent) and unmarried (72 percent) voters oppose privatization.

¹ Those states won by less than 55 percent of the vote for either candidate.

Not surprisingly, Republicans are one of the few groups of voters that support the President's plan (63 percent support, 23 percent oppose). But the plan is a clear loser among independents (66 percent oppose) and Democrats (92 percent oppose). However, even among Republicans there is a significant gender gap—with 69 percent of Republican men but only 55 percent of Republican women in favor.

Social Security has the potential to pay electoral dividends in 2006. When looking at the Congressional ballot for the upcoming election those who say they will definitely vote for the Republican candidate support the President's privatization plan (66 percent favor, 20 percent oppose, 14 percent unsure). However, both those who are voting for the Democratic candidate (92 percent oppose) and perhaps more importantly, those who are still undecided (63 percent oppose) are solidly opposed.

Majority opposition to privatization also holds constant across education levels, religion, and community type (urban, suburban, and rural voters). This issue may have the ability to create a wedge in the Republicans coalition. Born-again evangelicals oppose privatization 55 percent to 37 percent in favor and split on the Presidents' plan (42 percent oppose, 47 percent in favor). Among white evangelical Christians 39 percent oppose the President's plan and 49 percent oppose privatization. In other work we have done, we have found born-again Christians disproportionately dependent on Social Security for their retirement.

On the other hand, rural America may be the battleground. While a solid majority (59 percent) oppose privatization they are more split on the President's plan (41 percent in favor, 45 percent oppose). Rural Americans are also disproportionately dependent on Social Security for retirement and particularly supportive of Medicare—the next big fight.

Turnout will be key in the 2006 elections. Social Security may help Democrats motivate their base given the strong opposition to privatization among people of color and unmarried women. The solid majority of those less likely to turnout oppose privatization and the President's plan.

Democrats Hold 3-Point Lead In Congressional Ballot

Democrats currently hold a slight advantage on the Congressional ballot. Despite party identification being even, Democratic Congressional candidates currently have a 3-point advantage in the generic Congressional ballot (44 percent to 41 percent, with 15 percent undecided).

Democrats will need to maintain the focus on these pocketbook issues as the cycle progresses while taking care not to leave their national security flank as dangerously exposed as it is now. Currently they are being helped in this by the President's unblinking focus on Social Security, despite minimal (and waning) support for his plan.

The Democratic base is strongest among voters in the Midwest (52 percent), the West (54 percent), younger voters 18-34 (55 percent), African American voters (75 percent), Hispanic voters (55 percent), high school graduates (50 percent), single voters (63 percent), secular voters (58 percent), union household voters (55 percent), and urban voters (50 percent).

Republicans maintain a base with voters in the South Central region (56 percent), the Mountain States (52 percent), married voters (46 percent), born-again and evangelical voters (53 percent), veterans (47 percent), and gun-owning households (49 percent).

Undecided voters on the generic ballot will undoubtedly be a focus as the cycle progresses. While these voters are spread across demographic groups, they are disproportionately older, non-college educated white women.

Democrats have yet to fully turn the successes of the Social Security debate into voters. Seniors overall still lean slightly Republican. (Democrats lost seniors 2004). However, there is a huge gender gap. White senior women voter Democratic by 8-points, but white senior men are Republican by 43 points reflecting the gender gap we saw in 2004 and the more subdued support for Democrats among senior women. This obviously will require engaging the Social Security debate at the Congressional candidate level and many Republicans are trying to avoid that association.

Democratic support is slightly more consolidated than Republican support. Republicans support their candidate, 86 percent to 3 percent, with 11 percent undecided. Democrats back the Democratic candidate, 89 percent to 2 percent, with 10 percent undecided. The targeted independent voters favor the Democratic candidate over the Republican by 13-points (36 percent to 23 percent, with 40 percent undecided).

The gender gap is alive and well. Women continue to support the Democratic candidate over the Republican candidate (49 percent to 36 percent) by a margin even wider than their Democratic party identification (10-points Democratic). Men continue to favor the Republican candidate (46 percent to 38 percent), though by a smaller margin than their Republican party identification (12-points Republican).

Even more dramatic than the gender gap is the marriage gap. Single voters lean towards the Democratic candidate by a 38-point margin. Their married counterparts support the Republican candidate by a 9-point margin. Noticeably, single voters over-perform their levels of Democratic party identification (30-points Democratic), while married voters under-perform their levels of Republican party identification (12-points Republican). Unmarried women remain particularly Democratic with a 31-point margin on the ballot and a 30 point margin in party identification.

Building off the support we saw in the 2004, Democrats continue to receive their strongest backing from the youngest age cohort. Fifty-five percent of voters under 35 support the Democrat, while just 37 percent support the Republican. But Democratic support does not end with younger voters. In fact, Democrats hold an advantage among

every age group, except for seniors where the Republican candidate leads by 6-points (46 percent to 39 percent). Democrats lead Republicans among 35-44 years olds and 44-64 year olds by 5 points each.

Continued Concern Over The Economy

Voters are concerned about the economy and their own personal financial situations. They remain unsure about the future, but are even more concerned about personal financial stability now. In a dramatic shift from last fall, voters are currently more focused on the economy than terrorism and the war. In their own words, voters express their concerns over unemployment, the cost of occupation in Iraq, and the ballooning national debt.

“I think the economy is at fault, the way the government is controlling the economy. I believe the government is letting the oil go by whatever the costs are and they’re not doing anything about it to help the American citizens, and they are allowing the prices to rise.” Northeast man

“I’m currently unemployed and that is everything right now.” Northeast woman

“The economy is not doing very well. Michigan is losing jobs. Everyone in the country is losing jobs. Instead of sending jobs out of the country, we need them in the country.” Midwest woman

“We’re not paying attention to the economy. I think this war is just a diversion. I think the economy is in bad trouble. I’m worried about my Social Security in the future. Retirement. I worry about having enough money.” Midwest man

“Unemployment. This thing with Social Security. The way money is being spent overseas when we need it here. I see a lot of people who are unemployed, I now longer have health care insurance, if they take away my Social Security I have nothing. We are sending all our money overseas and they use the money against us sooner or later.” Midwest woman

“Well everything’s changed. You go to the drugstore and pay three times what you used to. It seems like everything’s gone up. It’s hard to make ends meet. Everything’s gone out of reach, so it’s hard to live.” Southern woman

“Well we’re running 500 billion dollar deficits and national debt for 7 trillion dollars, it’s unsound financial planning. That’s my primary concern.” Southern man

“Conditions in this country are getting worse every day and we’re getting further and further into debt every day. That’s about it, it can’t get much worse. The debt is going up in leaps and bounds. The cost of living is getting so bad that people can’t afford to live anymore.” Central Plains woman

“I feel that the national debt is going to come back and bite us in the future. I think that the government is spending vast amounts of money on pet projects. They are not looking out for the entire country.” Mountain states man

“The economy isn’t good. People need jobs” Western man

“Prices are getting higher and higher. Medical costs are through the roof. The prescriptions people can’t afford. Grocery prices are rising more than a person’s paycheck.” Western woman

Next to Social Security, voters’ top concerns are the economy and health care (8 percent each). In assessing the economic atmosphere, voters are quite negative in their outlook. Fifty-nine percent of voters are negative about the current state of the economy (41 percent just fair, 18 percent poor), and among those who are positive just 4 percent say it is in excellent condition (37 percent good). Democrats (29 percent poor, 55 percent just fair) and independents (27 percent, 42 percent just fair) are far more likely to rate the state of the economy negatively than Republicans (3 percent poor, 26 percent just fair).

Those voters most negative about the condition of the economy tend to be in the economically hard-hit Midwest (23 percent “poor”, 84 percent just fair and poor) and the West (24 percent “poor”, 62 percent just fair and poor). Also the youngest voters, those 18 to 34 years old (23 percent “poor”, 64 percent just fair and poor) and minority voters (29 percent of African Americans and 25 percent of Latinos say “poor”, 86 and 63 just fair and poor respectively) are disproportionately dissatisfied with the economy. White unmarried women, while less intense, are also quite negative about the economy—16 percent poor but 69 percent just fair and poor.

Voters are not confident that the economy is on an upswing. In fact, a majority of voters (52 percent) thinks the economy will be just fair or poor 6 months from now. Noticeably, the number who believes the economy will be poor in 6 months (18 percent) is no smaller than those who are most pessimistic about the current state of the economy.

When taking stock of their personal economic conditions, a majority of voters (58 percent) has not seen any improvement in the last year. Those who have seen a change are only slightly more likely to say their situation has improved (23 percent) than gotten worse (19 percent). Looking ahead, voters are slightly more optimistic about their family’s future (34 percent think they will be better off, 11 percent worse off) than they are about the country. Still, a majority of voters (52 percent) do not expect to see much change in their personal financial situation over the next year.

Anxiousness over the economy is palpable. Voters are far more concerned with the present – gaining stability and knowing their current sources of income are protected (62 percent) – than they are with the opportunity to make money in the future (29 percent). Those voters most concerned about maintaining stability and protecting their current sources of income tend to be in the Midwest (68 percent) and Mountain States (66

percent). Seniors are also particularly concerned about maintaining current stability in this economy (72 percent).

Voters see health care costs as the biggest economic issue facing their families, even beyond job losses and unemployment. Thirty-eight percent of voters say health care costs are the biggest economic issue for them and their families. This is more than double the next most pressing economic issues: taxes (14 percent), inflation (12 percent), and jobs and unemployment (11 percent). Voters across all age groups consider health care costs the top economic problem, with the exception of the youngest voters who are split between health care costs (26 percent) and jobs and unemployment (25 percent).

Health care costs are of the greatest concern to pre-retirement voters, those ages 45 to 64 (46 percent). Women are also particularly concerned about health care costs (45 percent), though it remains the top concern for men as well (29 percent). Concerns about health care costs are consistent across party lines with independents (37 percent) and Democrats (40 percent) only somewhat more concerned than Republicans (35 percent).

When voters are asked the biggest economic issue facing the country, health care costs remain number one (35 percent), though by a smaller margin. Jobs and unemployment (21 percent) and the deficit (20 percent) round out the top three economic concerns.

Democrats need to maintain the focus on these key economic issues – the economy, jobs, and health care costs – as Congressional Democrats hold clear advantages on these issues. We also need to expand these individual domestic issues into a broader perspective on the economy and prosperity.

Democrats Vs. Republicans On The Issues

While voters give Republicans the advantage on safeguarding America from a terrorist threat, dealing with Iraq, and holding the line on taxes, voters give Democrats the edge on the issues that top their agenda. **Voters afford Democrats in Congress an advantage on a number of key issues including strengthening Social Security (+15), creating jobs (+11), making prescription drugs affordable (+28), improving education (+15), holding down federal spending (+5), and being for the middle class (+22).**

Still, 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.

Another cause for concern for Democrats is that the Republicans have the advantage on keeping America prosperous (Democrats trail Bush by 3-points and the Republican party by 5-points) and holding the line on taxes (Democrats trail Bush by 19-points and

the Republican party by 13-points). Among undecided voters Democrats are even further behind Republicans on prosperity and split against Bush. However, Democrats do hold an advantage on the usual Republican stronghold of holding down federal spending (Democrats lead Bush by 3-points and have a 5-point advantage over Republicans). It should also be noted that while Bush in the past had enjoyed a double-digit advantage on improving education, he now holds just a 1-point advantage over Democrats on the issue and Democrats have a 15-point advantage over Republicans in Congress.

Of additional concern for Republicans in Congress is the fact that Democratic advantages over Congressional Republicans are even greater than they are over Bush. Republicans will likely try to narrow the focus of the economic debate to taxes where they hold an edge, however with a broader array of issues topping voters' agenda, Democrats should be able to keep the focus expansive and not allow jobs, healthcare, and Social Security to fall by the wayside.

	<i>DS vs. RS</i>	<i>DS vs. BUSH</i>
	<i>Dem Advantage</i>	<i>Dem Advantage</i>
<i>Making Prescription Drugs Affordable</i>	+28	+25
<i>For the Middle Class</i>	+22	+11
<i>Strengthening Social Security</i>	+15	+11
<i>Improving Education</i>	+15	-1
<i>Creating Jobs</i>	+11	+4
<i>Holding Down Federal Spending</i>	+5	+3
<i>Shares Your Values</i>	-3	-13
<i>Keeping America prosperous</i>	-5	-3
<i>Holding the Line on Taxes</i>	-13	-19
<i>Dealing with Iraq</i>	-18	-19
<i>Safeguarding America from Terrorism</i>	-28	-34

Bush's Precarious Image

As Bush continues to advance his second term agenda, voters do not like what they hear. Nearly three-quarters of voters say they have seen, read, or heard about the President and his policies lately. However, of those voters, 49 percent say it has made them less favorable towards him and 42 percent say it has made them more favorable. His favorability and job approval ratings remain polarized close to 50 percent (both are at 53 percent with 43 and 44 percent negative respectively).

Those voters who are most negative about Bush's job performance are those in the Midwest (49 percent disapprove), the West (52 percent disapprove), 18 to 34 year olds (49 percent), African Americans (68 percent), Democrats (79 percent) and independents (54 percent), secular voters (61 percent), union household members (49 percent), and urban voters (51 percent).

Voters who are disproportionately concerned with the economy (57 percent), jobs (58 percent), education (56 percent), and healthcare (57 percent) are all decidedly disapproving of the President's job performance.

At the moment, it does not appear that Bush will provide his troops the coattails he has in past elections. Not surprisingly, 94 percent of those who are voting for the Republican candidate approve of the President's job performance. And 78 percent of those voting for the Democratic candidate disapprove of his performance. **What is noticeable is that a majority (51 percent) of those voters who are undecided on the Congressional ballot now disapprove of Bush's job in office.**

Bush will try to turn the midterm elections to security and values where he has bigger margins, particularly among undecided voters. That, however, will be a tougher sell in the current environment where local candidates can more easily establish their values. Voters also are turning to their state and local office holders to solve domestic issues other than terrorism which they are leaving to the President. That speaks to a more favorable issue terrain in the 2006 elections for Democrats than we saw in 2004.