

The Battleground 2004
June 29, 2004

Democratic Strategic Analysis

by Celinda Lake, Daniel Gotoff, and Erica Prosser

Poor Ratings and Historical Trends Bode Poorly for Bush

Just over 4 months from Election Day, the Presidential election is extremely close. Support for the incumbent president remains below the crucial fifty percent level, as he is locked in a dead heat with his Democratic challenger. Neither candidate draws majority support in the trial heat, with 48 percent of voters supporting Kerry and 48 percent of voters supporting Bush. Intense support for the two men is similarly competitive, with 40 percent of voters on each side saying they will definitely vote for their candidate. Just 3 percent of the electorate is undecided in the race for President.

As we have seen in the past, partisan voters are firmly consolidated behind their parties' respective candidates. Ninety percent of Democrats are supporting Kerry and 92 percent of Republicans are supporting Bush. The underlying trends, however, seem to indicate that Kerry is breaking through the partisan polarization to make positive gains among key subgroups. In the Battleground states, Kerry is leading Bush, 50 percent to 46 percent. And among independent voters, Kerry is leading Bush, 48 percent to 40 percent. And asked generically, the Democrat leads the Republican in the Presidential election, 49 percent to 47 percent.

In such a polarized race, turnout is key. Kerry voters are even more energized than Bush voters: 80 percent of Kerry voters are extremely likely to vote versus 77 percent of Bush voters. One note in that regard, however, is African American voters, of whom only 60 percent say they are extremely likely to vote compared to 77 percent of white born-again Christians.

Clearly, President Bush is in a dangerous position, with historical trends boding poorly for his re-election fortunes. Just 46 percent of voters believe the President has done his job well enough to deserve being re-elected, down from 48 percent in March. ***And a 51 percent majority of voters now believe it is time to give someone new a chance, up from 49 percent in March.*** Bush's re-elect in Battleground states mirrors attitudes nationwide (45 percent re-elect versus 51 percent someone new). Among independents, however, the desire for someone new is even greater (39 percent re-elect versus 54 percent someone new).

Bush's personal image is now heavily polarized. Fifty-one percent of voters have a favorable impression of Bush and 47 percent have an unfavorable impression. In March, 51 percent had a favorable impression of him and 46 percent had an unfavorable impression. This measure has shifted dramatically this year from the time when his personal image was one of the strongest pillars of his Presidency. Intensity is high on both sides, as 37 percent of voters have a strongly favorable impression of Bush and 37 percent have a strongly unfavorable impression of Bush.

Additionally, Bush's job approval is teetering at 51 percent. Forty-eight percent of voters disapprove of the job Bush is doing. This represents a slight up-tick from March (48 percent approve to 49 percent disapprove). According to historical Gallup data, however, no Presidential incumbent with a job approval rating so low has gone on to win re-election. While Bush's job approval is close to even in Battleground states (50 percent approve to 48 percent disapprove), it is narrowly net negative among the independent voters who will determine the outcome of this election. Among independent voters, 47 percent approve of his job performance and 49 percent disapprove.

John Kerry is well poised to capitalize on Bush's poor standing. Fifty-one percent of voters have a favorable impression of Kerry and 43 percent have an unfavorable impression. Kerry's image is even more positive in the Battleground states, where 54 percent have a favorable impression of him and 43 percent have an unfavorable impression. It is noticeable, however, that Kerry's unfavorable ratings have increased

slightly since the March survey, when 52 percent had a favorable impression of him and 38 percent had an unfavorable impression.

Gaps Galore – Racial, Gender, Marital, Religion

The gender gap appears to have narrowed somewhat since March. Bush's margin among men is currently +7, where it was +12 in March. Similarly, Kerry's margin among women has decreased slightly, from +13 in March to +6 now. Bush now wins men, 52 percent to 44 percent. In March, Bush led Kerry among men, 54 percent to 42 percent. Kerry is leading Bush among women by 51 percent to 45 percent. In March, Kerry led Bush among women, 55 percent to 42 percent.

There is also a marital gap, which is significantly greater than the gender gap. Married voters support Bush by 12 points (54 percent to 42 percent), while unmarried voters support Kerry by 20 points (59 percent to 38 percent). Unmarried women are a key base group for Kerry at 61 percent support. Married women, on the other hand, support Bush by 10 points (53 percent to 43 percent), slightly less than the 15-point Bush margin among married men (55 percent to 40 percent).

White voters support Bush by 9 points, 52 percent to 43 percent, while African Americans support Kerry by 60 points. Hispanic voters currently support Kerry by 16 points, 56 percent to 40 percent.

Religiosity and religion are major divides in this election, although race is an even more powerful variable. White evangelical Christians support Bush, 74 percent to 22 percent. While white non-conservative Christians support Kerry, 59 percent to 32 percent. Secular voters also support Kerry, 67 percent to 29 percent. Catholics are divided, with White Catholics leaning toward Bush, 51 percent to 45 percent, but non-white Catholics solidly supporting Kerry 63 percent to 32 percent.¹

¹ It should be noted that the sample size of the population was somewhat small.

In sum Bush's base consists of married voters, white voters, white evangelicals, voters in the South Central region, and men. Kerry's base consists of African American voters, non-religious voters, single voters, labor union households, urban voters, and women, especially younger women, minority women, and unmarried women. The swing voters tend to be non-college educated younger voters, moderates, and voters in the Midwest.

Underlying the demographic polarization are people's attitudes on the direction of the country. Overall, voters are pessimistic about the direction of the country. Just forty percent of voters believe the country is headed in the right direction, and 92 percent of these voters are supporting Bush. By comparison, a 55 percent majority of voters who believe things have gotten off on the wrong track. Eighty percent of these voters are supporting Kerry. Swing voters and independent voters are solidly negative about the direction of the country, 29 percent right direction to 64 percent wrong track.

Similarly, voters who believe that the economy is in good shape support Bush, 86 percent to 12 percent for Kerry. Voters who rate the economy negatively are much more likely to support Kerry. Voters who rate the economy as "fair" back Kerry by 27 points, 61 percent to 34 percent for Bush. And voters who rate the economy as "poor" support Kerry by an even wider margin, 83 percent to 11 percent for Bush. Again swing and independent voters are negative about the economy: 31 percent "excellent"/ "good" to 67 percent "fair"/ "poor".

Voters' Attitudes on Economy and Jobs Not Tracking with Conventional Wisdom

Contrary to conventional wisdom, voters remain negative about the current state of the economy as well as their own personal financial situation. Just over one-third of voters rate the economy as "excellent" (6 percent) or "good" (31 percent). A solid majority of voters rate the economy negatively: 41 percent "fair" and 22 percent "poor". In fact, aside from Republicans, a solid majority of every subgroup of voters is negative about the state of the economy. Among voters in Battleground states, 38 percent rate the

economy as either “excellent” or “good” compared to 61 percent who rate it as either “fair” or “poor”. Independent voters are even more negative: 31 percent rate the economy as either “excellent” or “good” compared to 67 percent who rate it as either “fair” or “poor”.

A majority of voters describes what is happening with the economy today as either not going well in the country and not so well for people like them (33 percent) or not going well in the country but going well for people like them (18 percent). Another 11 percent see the economy as going well in the country but not so well for people like them. Just 34 percent of voters see the economy as going well in the country and well for people like them. These measures are far more negative among certain key target groups, such as unmarried women (45 percent “not going well in the country or for people like them”), African American voters (52 percent), Hispanic voters (42 percent), and non-college educated men (37 percent).

The number one economic concern for voters is jobs. Fully 62 percent of voters say that jobs and unemployment are their top concerns about the economy. Another 17 percent cite inflation as their top concern, followed by 10 percent who point to interest rates, and just 7 percent who say the stock market. It is interesting that, despite the Bush campaign’s – and the media’s – focus on job creation numbers, voters not only remain negative on the state of the economy, but almost singularly focused on jobs and unemployment. In fact, 23 percent of voters say that they have had an immediate family member lose their job in the last 12 months – that figure jumps to 30 percent among independents and voters under 45. A whopping 45 percent of voters personally know someone who has lost their job, including 53 percent of those under 45 years of age and 50 percent of independents. Even in the states that are coming back, we have seen voters shift their focus from the number of jobs to the quality of jobs being created.

Additionally, voters’ sense of their own personal financial situation remains mixed, and has actually declined slightly since March. Fewer voters say they are doing better than they were a year ago. And slightly fewer voters are optimistic about what the

future will mean for them economically. Just 26 percent of voters say that, thinking about their own personal financial situation, they are better off than they were a year ago. In March, that measure stood at 28 percent. Twenty-three percent of voters say are worse off than they were a year ago. This represents a slight up-tick from March, when just 20 percent of voters said they were worse off than they were a year ago. Fifty percent of voters say their personal financial situation has stayed the same compared to a year ago. However, of those who say their personal financial situation has stayed the same, just half say they are doing well personally, including just 28 percent who say that both they and the country are doing well.

A deeper look at this measure reveals that Republicans are driving up the nationwide average for voters who say they are doing better than a year ago. Independents and Democrats are both more likely to say their personal financial situation is worse than it was a year ago. Among Republicans, 45 percent their personal financial situation is better than a year ago, 8 percent say it is worse, and 47 percent say it is about the same. Among Democrats, 11 percent their personal financial situation is better than a year ago, 37 percent say it is worse, and 52 percent say it is about the same. And among independents, 16 percent their personal financial situation is better than a year ago, 28 percent say it is worse, and 55 percent say it is about the same.

In assessing their personal financial situation a year from now, voters remain more optimistic than pessimistic, but their optimism has ebbed from where it was in March. Currently, 33 percent of voters say that, looking ahead a year from now, they think they are their family will be better off financially. Nine percent say they will be worse off and a 55 percent majority believe their financial situation will be the same a year from now. In March, however, 40 percent of voters thought that they are their family would be better off financially a year later. This measure declined across the board from March, but disproportionately with women, younger voters, non-college educated men, African Americans, and moderate voters. Seven percent thought they would be worse of financially, and 47 percent thought they would be about the same.

Mixed Media Exposure Overall, But Positive Signs for Kerry in Battleground States

Most voters have seen political advertisements recently. Although current media exposure has been slightly worse for Kerry than for Bush, Kerry boasts an edge in terms of the effect of that exposure in the coveted Battleground states.

Nearly three quarters of voters recall having seen or heard a political advertisement during the past week on either the television or radio. Nineteen percent say they have seen a political ad more than 10 times, another 18 percent say they have seen a political ad more between six and 10 times, and 37 percent say they have seen a political ad more between one and five times. Just 24 percent of voters say they have seen no political ads in the last week.

Not surprisingly, voters in Battleground states report having seen political ads at a much higher rate than voters overall. Fully 29 percent say they have seen a political ad more than 10 times, another 28 percent say they have seen a political ad more between six and 10 times, and 32 percent say they have seen a political ad more between one and five times. Just 10 percent of voters in Battleground states say they have not seen any political ads in the last week.

Contrary to conventional wisdom, media exposure has been slightly kinder to Bush than to Kerry. Seventy-two percent of voters have seen, heard, or read something recently about Bush and his campaign. Forty percent of all voters say that what they saw made them more likely to vote for Bush, 45 percent say that what they saw made them less likely to vote for Bush, and 15 percent say that what they saw either made no difference or they were unsure of the effect it had. The news for Bush in Battleground states, however, is less positive. Eighty-three percent of voters in Battleground states have seen, heard, or read something recently about Bush and his campaign. But only 38 percent of these voters say that what they saw made them more likely to vote for Bush and 46 percent say that what they saw made them less likely to vote for Bush.

Media exposure for Kerry has been slightly more elevated, but no kinder. Eighty-one percent of voters have seen, heard, or read something recently about Kerry and his campaign. Thirty-nine percent of all voters say that what they saw made them more likely to vote for Kerry, 47 percent say that what they saw made them less likely to vote for Kerry, and 14 percent say that what they saw either made no difference or they were unsure of the effect it had. The news for Kerry in Battleground states, however, is more positive. Eighty-seven percent of voters in Battleground states have seen, heard, or read something recently about Bush and his campaign. And in contrast to the national trends, 42 percent of voters in these states say that what they saw made them more likely to vote for Kerry and 44 percent say that what they saw made them less likely to vote for Kerry.

The Race for the House: Democrats Maintain a Lead in the Congressional Ballot

Democrats continue to hold a lead in the generic Congressional ballot. This steady and even increasing margin, coupled with victories in two recent Congressional special elections – in Kentucky and South Dakota – bode well for Democrats. The combination also suggests the potential for a wave of Democratic victories in November and even hint at the opportunity to regain the majority.

In the generic Congressional ballot, 48 percent of voters support the Democratic candidate while 41 percent support the Republican candidate—a margin of 7-points, up 1-point from the March Battleground survey. Eleven percent of voters remain undecided on the Congressional ballot. Voters are also more intense in their support of the Democratic Congressional candidate. Forty-five percent of voters are solid in their support of the Democratic Congressional candidate, while only 37 percent of voters are solid in their support of the Republican candidate.

Bush, who is already facing a tough challenge in his own re-election campaign, appears to offer no coattails to Congressional Republicans. Republican Congressional candidates see a 7-point drop-off from Bush on the ballot measures. This is up from 5-

points in the March Battleground survey. While the Presidential candidates have polarized the base, this dynamic has not carried over to the Congressional races.

Congressional Democrats continue to be even stronger in the Presidential Battleground states (+9-points). In these states, the Democratic candidate receives 49 percent of the vote versus 40 percent for the Republican candidate. The Democratic base of support includes traditional target groups as well as several targeted swing groups. Among these are voters in the Northeast (+19-points), women (+14), African Americans (+79) and Hispanics (+25), unmarried voters including single (+30) and no longer married (+26) voters—especially unmarried women (+34), and labor members (+34) and those in labor households (+24). Targeted voting groups, including independents (+13) and those who are undecided in the Presidential election (+2), also favor the Democrat in the Congressional ballot.

Overall, 10 percent of Bush voters on the initial ballot shift to vote for the Democratic Congressional candidate. This is twice the drop-off of five percent from Kerry voters to the Republican candidate. Moreover, voters are looking for Congressional representation that is not just a rubberstamp of the administration or party leadership. Of the 41 percent of voters who choose the Republican Congressional candidate fully half say they want a representative who will be independent of the President. And 44 percent of Bush voters say they want a representative that is independent of the President. Voters overall, and even voters who say they will vote to re-elect the President, are not eager to send Bush “his team”. In other work we have done, we have found that sixty percent or more of voters in swing area want a member of Congress independent of, and to balance, George Bush. This indicates a desire for change that could manifest itself in a pickup for Democrats at the Congressional level.

Voters’ outlook on the economy carries down the ballot as a key indicator of their vote. Like in the Presidential race those voters less optimistic about the economy and the country are also more likely to vote Democratic. Voters who think the country is off on the wrong track (+63-points), those who cite the economy as the number one problem in

their area (+22), and those who either have a family member or they themselves have lost a job (+37) support the Democratic candidate.

Democratic Advantage on Deciding Issues

Democrats continue to hold an advantage over Republicans on the majority of the major issues tested, including a considerable advantage on several key issues. There is a clear preference for Democratic leadership on deciding issues including health care, education, Social Security, and jobs. The margins on these issues are even wider among targeted independents. While Congressional Republicans retain their traditional advantage on foreign affairs including defense and terrorism issues and taxes, Democrats command a lead on the domestic issues that voters are particularly looking to their Congressional representatives to address.

	<i>WHO IS BETTER ON...?</i>				
	<i>Dems</i>	<i>GOP</i>	<i>Margin</i>	<i>Margin (BG States)</i>	<i>March Margin</i>
<i>Improving the health care system</i>	57%	33%	+24	+30	+23
<i>Strengthening Social Security</i>	56%	34%	+22	+28	+19
<i>Protecting the middle class</i>	57%	36%	+21	+24	+19
<i>Improving education</i>	53%	37%	+16	+21	+7
<i>Creating jobs</i>	51%	41%	+10	+15	+14
<i>Holding down federal spending</i>	45%	43%	+1	+0	+5
<i>Sharing your values</i>	48%	45%	+3	+7	+4
<i>Keeping America prosperous</i>	46%	47%	+0	+7	+4
<i>Dealing with Iraq</i>	39%	52%	-14	-11	N/A
<i>Holding the line on taxes</i>	38%	53%	-15	-14	-12
<i>Safeguarding U.S. from a terrorist threat</i>	34%	55%	-21	-20	-23

Democrats hold a sizeable 24-point advantage on improving the health care system. Democrats also boasts leads on other key issues, including strengthening Social Security (+22), and protecting the middle class (+21) – both up from 19-point margins in our last Battleground survey. Among independents, the advantages are even stronger, particularly on strengthening Social Security (+37), protecting the middle class (+34), and improving the health care system (+33). There is also a decided preference for

Democrats on the pivotal issues of improving the education system (+16) and creating jobs (+10), including among independent voters (+26 and +21, respectively).

Additionally, those voters who are likely to be more focused on particular domestic issues see Congressional Democrats as better on their issues. Parents, who are among the most education-oriented voters, afford Democrats an advantage on improving education (+15 for mothers and +2 for fathers). Similarly, those voters who cite unemployment and jobs as the number one problem in their area afford Congressional Democrats a 29-point advantage on creating jobs. And on strengthening Social Security, Democrats enjoy a lead among seniors (+12) as well as the pre-retirement voters (+21) who are increasingly focused on this issue.

Democrats are also competitive on some issues that were once seen as traditional Republican strongholds, including holding down federal spending (+1), sharing your values (+3), and keeping America prosperous (even). On many of these issues, the margins for Congressional Republicans are well under the margins for Bush, reinforcing the notion of limited – or nonexistent – coattails for this President. Finally, even on Republican strengths, such as the war in Iraq and terrorism, there is a significant gender gap. On the war in Iraq, men give Republicans a 22-point advantage, but women give Republicans only a 7-point advantage. Similarly, on terrorism, men give Republicans a 33-point advantage, but women give Republicans only a 10-point advantage.

Kerry Leads on Domestic Issues, Smaller Margins for Bush on Iraq and Terrorism

While voters believe Kerry would do a better job than Bush on a number of key issues, the issue context has narrowed on the economy and terrorism and voters' focus is a determining factor in the Presidential vote. Kerry's advantage is strong on domestic issues that personally affect voters including creating jobs, strengthening Social Security, improving education, and making prescription drugs more affordable. Bush enjoys a healthy margin on the critical dimensions of the war in Iraq and the war on terrorism, though the margins have deteriorated to some extent. Voters are divided on who would

do a better job on keeping America prosperous. Bush’s advantage on Iraq is only 10 points, and among women is nearly even (+2).

Bush retains an advantage on traditional Republican issues including holding the line on taxes (19-point Bush advantage), dealing with the war in Iraq (+10), and safeguarding America from terrorism (+20), but nothing like the overwhelming leads of the past. And Kerry has picked up some ground on these issues. In the March survey, Bush enjoyed a 14-point advantage on Iraq and a 24-point advantage on safeguarding America from terrorism. Bush has picked-up a 5-point wider margin on holding the line on taxes. While Bush still runs significantly ahead of his party on education, Kerry has a 6-point advantage on this issue overall, including among independents (+19) and independent women (+21). Education was the cornerstone issue of Bush’s compassionate conservative agenda; this is a major loss for Bush.

	<i>WHO IS BETTER ON...?</i>			
	<i>Bush</i>	<i>Kerry</i>	<i>Margin</i>	<i>Margin (BG States)</i>
<i>Making Rx Drugs More Affordable</i>	32%	52%	+21	+24
<i>Strengthening Social Security</i>	36%	51%	+16	+18
<i>Creating jobs</i>	42%	49%	+7	+8
<i>Improving education</i>	42%	48%	+6	+10
<i>Keeping America prosperous</i>	47%	46%	-1	+3
<i>Holding down federal spending</i>	41%	46%	+5	+6
<i>Cares about people like me</i>	41%	46%	+5	+6
<i>Represents my values</i>	48%	44%	-4	-1
<i>Dealing with Iraq</i>	51%	42%	-10	-9
<i>Honest and trustworthy</i>	45%	42%	-3	-1
<i>Strong leader</i>	54%	38%	-17	-15
<i>Holding the line on taxes</i>	54%	36%	-19	-13
<i>Steady, consistent leader</i>	54%	36%	-18	-20
<i>Safeguarding U.S. from a terrorist threat</i>	55%	35%	-20	-19
<i>Says what he believes</i>	57%	34%	-23	-23

Many voters still see Bush as a strong leader, even if they are not as positive on his policy directions. Bush retains the advantage on leadership traits, including being a strong leader (17-point advantage) and steady, consistent leadership (+18). Bush also holds an advantage on saying what he believes (+18), a troubling, if not terribly surprising, finding, given the negative advertising that has been leveled against Kerry on the dimension. Still, Bush is running basically even on representing voters' values (+4) and being honest and trustworthy (+3).

Kerry is Strong on Key Domestic Issues

Kerry continues to enjoy the advantage on a number of key issues. Voters say he would be better on the domestic issues that affect them most. Kerry has increased his margin on the hotly debated issues of making prescription drugs affordable. He currently holds a 20-point advantage (52 percent to 32 percent for Bush); this is up from a 15-point margin in the last Battleground survey. Kerry is also seen as stronger on improving education (+6-points), even though Bush has made education a central issue of his Presidency. Kerry has an advantage on top-of-mind concerns for many voters including strengthening Social Security (+15) and creating jobs (+7), as well as the traditionally Republican stronghold of holding down federal spending (+5). Personally, voters afford Kerry the advantage on caring about people like them. By 46 percent to 41 percent, voters say 'cares about people like me' describes Kerry better than Bush.