

The Battleground 2004
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Democratic Strategic Analysis

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The race for the White House remains historically close. Barring unforeseen circumstances, only slight changes seem even possible in the unprecedented polarized electorate until the end. Kerry has a slight lead on the various ballot measures and the Democrats have held their advantage in the generic Congressional ballot. Still many of these measures fall either close to or within the margin of error.

Despite the focus on the war going on over the airwaves, we are likely to see, for the first time, a national campaign that could be won or lost in the field. While the campaigns have solidified their bases they will have to put time, effort, and resources into extensive GOTV campaigns, even while they continue their efforts to persuade the limited undecided portion of the electorate. Voters, particularly in the battleground states, who are feeling overwhelmed now haven't seen anything yet. As the focus continues to narrow on these pivotal swing states the competition – and the clutter – will intensify in an effort to gain even the smallest winning margin. This allocation of resources is a critical exercise, as this survey data shows the election narrowing among much of the electorate and turnout elevating as the key to victory in November.

Kerry Wins Head-to-Head, No Matter How You Ask It

No matter how voters are asked – with or without candidate names offered and with or without a third candidate – John Kerry tops all of the ballots in this Battleground Poll. For the first time Kerry is ahead in the unaided ballot. The race, however, remains extremely close, just 11 weeks from election day. In a two way ballot (in which voters were able to offer Ralph Nader as their choice), Kerry has a 2-point margin, 49 percent to 47 percent, with less than one percent volunteering Nader. Four percent of the electorate remains undecided. This ballot is probably the most conclusive nationally, as Nader will not appear on the ballot in all 50 states. Intense support for the

two candidates remains equally as balanced with 43 percent of voters saying they definitely support Kerry and 41 percent as strong for Bush. This is a positive, though slight, change for Kerry from the deadlock we saw in the June Battleground Poll that had both of the major party candidates at 48 percent, with Nader still receiving one percent and three percent also being undecided. **Of key concern for the Bush team is that at no point in any of our 2004 Battleground polls has Bush broken 50 percent on this ballot.**

However, while some political analysts are speculating (and some Republican strategists are banking on) Nader being a spoiler for Kerry, the Senator maintains a slight lead even when Nader is given as an option, (48 percent Kerry, 47 percent Bush, 3 percent Nader, 3 percent undecided). Kerry also has a one-point margin in an unaided trial heat, where voters are asked an open-ended ballot without the candidates' names offered (44 percent Kerry, 43, percent, Bush, 1 percent Nader, 12 percent undecided). While a larger number of voters are undecided in this measure, we have seen apparent movement on this ballot over the past two Battleground Polls from undecided to Kerry as voters become more familiar with the Democratic nominee (March Battleground: 43 percent Bush, 39 percent Kerry, 15 percent undecided; June Battleground: 43 percent Bush, 41 percent Kerry, 13 percent undecided). And perhaps more indicative on both the two-way and three-way ballot, in the highly targeted battleground states Kerry enjoys a slightly stronger lead (49 percent Kerry to 46 percent Bush with 4 percent remaining undecided on two way ballot; 49 percent Kerry, 46 percent Bush, 2 percent Nader, 3 percent undecided on the three-way ballot). Moreover, despite weeks of blistering attacks, Kerry has a three point advantage comparing peoples' affect toward the two candidates.

As we have seen throughout recent months the candidates have solidified their support on partisan lines with 92 percent of Republicans supporting the President (which is the same as in our June poll) and 93 percent of Democrats supporting Kerry (up from 90 percent in June). Independents remain almost evenly split with 40 percent supporting Bush, 41 percent supporting Kerry, and 16 percent still undecided.

In an election where turnout is key, it is important to note that Democrats and Republicans are equally energized (77 percent and 76 percent extremely likely to vote respectively) showing parity among Democrats unlike the previous Battleground. Democrats, however, need to be alert that African Americans (67 percent extremely likely) and Hispanics (62 percent) show less intensity, while Republican base voters – namely, white evangelical Christians (77 percent) – are energized.

A Losing Referendum for Bush

If re-election campaigns are in fact a referenda on incumbents, as recent history has dictated, it appears to be a losing referendum for Bush. **Half of voters (50 percent) do not think Bush has done a good enough job to deserve re-election and say that someone new should be elected.** While less than half, 47 percent, say he has performed up to par and should be re-elected, 3 percent of voters are unsure.

This sentiment is mirrored among targeted segments of the population. **Voters in the Battleground states are even less likely to say the President deserves to be re-elected, 45 percent, with over half, 51 percent, saying it is time to give someone new a chance.** A plurality of independents also are looking to see someone new in the White House (47 percent), rather than re-elect Bush (41 percent). Among the small number of undecided voters only 9 percent want to re-elect Bush, 45 percent want someone new, and the rest are undecided.

Bush's Charm Offensive a Bust Outside the Beltway

For a President who relied heavily on his personal image in the early part of his Presidency, Bush now faces a polarized electorate on even this dimension. As we have seen in our two most recent Battleground polls, Bush's personal image remains polarized with 51 percent having a favorable opinion of him and 47 percent having an unfavorable opinion. It is even more divided when we look at the intensity of feeling among voters, 38 percent have a very favorable impression and 38 percent have a very

unfavorable impression. Despite massive paid and earned media efforts by the White House and his campaign, Bush's personal image numbers have not improved since our June Battleground poll. Positive ads – even on homeland security – have not improved Bush's vote nor his favorability.

The President's job approval also continues to hover near the 50 percent mark as it has since March. Fifty-two percent of voters say they approve of the job Bush has done as President, while 46 percent disapprove. The numbers are arguably the most encouraging for President Bush in this data, though job approval appears to be correlating less directly with ballot support than it has historically. The electorate in the pivotal battleground states is even more polarized, with just 50 percent giving Bush a positive rating and 49 percent a negative rating. Similarly, the President enjoys just a 1-point positive job approval rating among independents, and he does not reach 50 percent approval among these voters (47 percent approve, 46 percent disapprove).

If the election is a referendum on the ticket, Bush does not receive any boost from his running mate. In fact, he may see negative pull from Dick Cheney, as indicated by Cheney's negative personal image ratings. The Vice-President has not reached a 50 percent favorable rating in recent months and in-fact has had a slow but continual decline, remaining a very polarizing figure in this election. Just 46 percent of the electorate have a favorable impression of Cheney, while 47 percent's opinions are unfavorable. This is up from a 46 percent unfavorable opinion in June and 41 percent in March. Looking at the intensity ratings of the Vice President's image is even more worrisome for the Bush ticket, only one-quarter of the electorate (25 percent) have a strongly favorable opinion of Cheney, while 36 percent express a strongly unfavorable opinion.

Edwards is less well-known, but 54 percent of voters like him and only 30 percent are unfavorable, with half the strongly unfavorable (18 percent) of Cheney. Both vice presidential candidates are viewed positively among their partisan bases (83 percent favorable Edwards, 83 percent favorable Cheney) but independents, who really like

Edwards (55 percent favorable to 25 percent unfavorable), solidly dislike Cheney (41 percent favorable to 51 percent unfavorable).

Kerry Poised to Capitalize on Pessimistic Image of Bush

While the President's personal image has been in decline, the electorate is looking more favorably on Kerry. **Fifty-four percent of voters have a positive personal image of the Senator, this is up from 51 percent in June.** Contrary to the conventional wisdom of the punditry, Kerry is actually better liked by American voters than George W. Bush. In fact, despite the barrage of advertising his negative image has decreased slightly from 43 percent to 42 percent. Similarly, those voters who have a strongly favorable image of the Democratic candidate have also increased (26 percent in June to 30 percent currently).

Kerry's image in that battleground states mirrors that of the overall electorate (54 percent favorable, 42 percent unfavorable). Swing independent voters are also net positive in their impressions of Kerry (52 percent favorable, 41 percent unfavorable).

Pessimism Continues on Direction of the Country and the Economy

"The war and the economy. Well there's not jobs and of course the deficit is bad. We're getting our young men killed in Iraq. It looks like there's no win. Everything seems to be getting worse in the U.S. The economy and everything is not getting better." independent woman

"Jobs for America. The way the economy, free trade enterprises away the jobs. Underdeveloped countries catching up with technology. America needs to come up with a way to keep the high paying technological jobs and low paying laboring jobs." independent man

The Bush campaign will have to continue to try to assert they have made progress in the face of a skeptical and pessimistic electorate. More than half of the country (54

percent) continue to think the country is off on the wrong track, compared to 39 percent who think it is headed in the right direction. The percentage of the electorate that is optimistic about the direction of the country has not changed since June, despite White House claims of improved outlook and “turning the corner”. And battleground state voters and independents have an equally negative outlook (54 percent wrong track to 39 percent right direction and 59 percent wrong track to 33 percent right direction, respectively).

Kerry seems poised to show voters he can be a catalyst for positive change on these measures. Kerry holds a 4-point advantage from voters on representing “will lead the country in the right direction.” Kerry enjoys an advantage on this leadership dimension among the most targeted voters including those in battleground states (+5), the swing independent voters (+5), though this suggests a continued close election.

Voters are also solidly negative in their assessments of the economy, with only 36 percent of the electorate saying the economy is in excellent or good condition compared to 63 percent saying it is just fair or poor. Despite assertions over recent months from the Republicans that the economy is improving the numbers are virtually unchanged. **Swing independent voters are even less positive about the economy than the general electorate (28 percent say the economy is excellent or good, 72 percent just fair or poor), and battleground states are also negative (37 percent excellent or good, 63 percent fair or poor).**

“Probably the economy. Well I don’t think it has made a complete come back since 9-11, it needs to make a stronger comeback. We need some jobs that people could make a living with, like \$15 to \$20 an hour jobs.”
independent woman

“..I see so many people that lost their jobs. There’s so many people. The interest rates are down but people can’t buy homes because they don’t have jobs to start with. The living standard is falling.”
independent woman

“Because (the economy) is going downhill, too many people are unemployed and costs are rising.” Republican man

Americans are also remarkably pessimistic about the future – only 45 percent think it will be good or excellent in the future and 44 percent think it will be just fair or poor. Again independents are particularly negative (37 percent good/ excellent to 55 percent just fair/ poor).

Voters’ sense of their own personal financial situation remains mixed. Just 28 percent of voters say that, thinking about their own family’s financial situation, they are better off than they were a year ago. While there was a very slight jump in these numbers in June, this is the same as where the electorate stood in March on this question (28 percent better off). Twenty-one 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-one percent of voters say their personal financial situation has stayed the same compared to a year ago.

A deeper look at this measure reveals that Republicans are driving up the nationwide average for voters who say they are doing better than they were a year ago. Democrats are more likely to say their personal financial situation is worse than it was a year ago and independents are more evenly split, with a majority saying their situation is about the same as it was a year ago. Among Republicans, 45 percent their personal financial situation is better than a year ago, 9 percent say it is worse, and 46 percent say it is about the same. Among Democrats, 12 percent their personal financial situation is better than a year ago, 32 percent say it is worse, and 54 percent say it is about the same. And among independents, 24 percent their personal financial situation is better than a year ago, 21 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, though voters are split on whether their families’

situation will improve or stay relatively the same. Currently, 43 percent of voters say that, looking ahead a year from now, they think they are their family will be better off financially. Four percent say they will be worse off and 44 percent believe their financial situation will be the same a year from now. However, given how negative people feel about the economy, the Bush administration can not take much solace from those numbers. In fact, among those who believe their future or the current status is about the same only 30 percent believe the economy is in good shape and 70 percent say it is in poor or just fair shape. And for the future only 45 percent believe the economy will be in good shape while a majority say just fair or poor (49 percent) or don't know (11 percent). In fact, no demographic group has a majority of voters who rate the economy now as good.

With the focus on the economy obvious this cycle, it is also telling to note that Kerry holds an advantage when asked which candidate will keep America prosperous. While neither candidate receives a majority on this measure, Kerry, with 48 percent, has a 3-point edge over Bush (45 percent). As with the direction of the country measure, Kerry is even stronger with those voters who have received the most focus from the campaigns. Among those in battleground states he holds a 7-point advantage and among independent voters a 6-point margin. Kerry has an even more substantial 11-point advantage on creating jobs, expanding to 16 points in battleground states and 15 points among independents.

Kerry Holds Lead on Key Domestic Issues and Narrows Gaps in Other Areas

Kerry maintains an advantage on a number of key domestic issues, and has closed the gap on several other. The economy and jobs and Iraq and terrorism remain at the top of voters' issues agenda. However, while we expect these issues to remain central in this election, the electorate should also begin to look at traditional domestic issues as the election approaches, which will give Kerry an added advantage as voters give him an edge on these issues also.

Voters afford Kerry an advantage over Bush on such pivotal issues as creating jobs (+11) and keeping America prosperous (+3). In fact, more than half the electorate (51 percent) say Kerry would do a better job at creating jobs, compared to 40 percent who name Bush, a margin that has grown since our June Battleground when voters gave Kerry a 7-point advantage on this key task. Kerry's advantage on creating jobs is even higher in the Battleground states (+16). Fifty-three percent of the voters in these states – many of which have been hard hit by job loss over the past three years – say Kerry would do a better job at creating jobs compared to 37 percent who think Bush would. Similarly, independents give Kerry a 15-point advantage on this measure.

Voters also give Kerry a strong edge when asked who would do a better job on issues that affect them and their families, such as making prescription drugs more affordable (+14), strengthening Social Security (+14), and improving education (+6). Seniors, who are a consistent battleground constituency, are even more sure of Kerry on the issue despite (or perhaps because of) the President's prescription drug package; seniors afford Kerry a 16-point advantage on making prescription drugs more affordable. Likewise, pre-retirement voters (those ages 45 to 65), who are looking ahead at the concerns surrounding the solvency of Social Security, give Kerry a stronger advantage on strengthening it (+18) than the electorate overall. Education, which was a pillar of the President's first campaign and first term agenda has not played out in Bush's favor among swing voters. In fact, independents (+6), and particularly independent women (+12), give Kerry the edge on education. In general, the electorate believe Kerry more than Bush 'cares about people like me' (+6), a personal dimension that is likely to come into more play as undecided voters make their choice.

Waning Margins for Bush on Iraq and Terrorism

While Bush continues to enjoy a healthy margin on the critical dimensions of the war in Iraq and the war on terrorism, his margins have deteriorated to some extent. Bush's advantage on Iraq is only 12 points, and is down to 8 points among voters in Battleground states.

However while voters were fairly divided on who would do a better job on keeping America prosperous in June, they now lean towards Kerry (+3). **Both independents (+6) and those in battleground states (+7) also give Kerry a wider margin than the overall electorate on keeping America prosperous.** Health care is a major issue particularly among women and undecided voters. As we have seen, Kerry is 14 points ahead on prescription drugs as well as on strengthening Social Security (although seniors are only nine points ahead).

Bush is seen as a strong leader, even if voters are not as positive on his policy directions. Bush retains the advantage on leadership traits, including being a strong leader (12-point advantage) and steady, consistent leadership (14-points), however this is a decrease from an 18-point advantage in June. This correlates with Bush's continued lead on terrorism (17 points) – men give him a 27-point advantage and women a 9-point advantage. Older women, a key swing constituency, give him a 6 point advantage on terrorism. Bush retains the advantage on traditional the Republican stronghold of holding the line on taxes (16-points), however, on another traditionally Republican stronghold, holding down federal spending Kerry is given a 1-point advantage.

Bush also continues to be seen as better representing “saying what he believes” (13-points). However, despite the barrage of attacks that have been leveled against Kerry on this dimension over the past several months, the President's advantage on this has decreased in the 2 months since the last Battleground poll when it was +18 points. At the same time, Bush should be concerned that the candidates are running basically even on representing voters' values – something the President's campaign and Republicans in general have tried to use as a cleavage point. The two men are also even in terms of who has a plan to deal with the problems facing our country – another attack that has been leveled against Kerry. Finally, Kerry is rated 6 points ahead on caring for people.

Campaigns Penetrate by Air and on the Ground – More Effective for Kerry

In a race that is more polarized than any in memorable history voters are being bombarded early and often, not only on television and in newspapers but also on their telephones, in their mailboxes, and even at their doors. And the majority of this contact is targeted at the roughly 4 percent of the electorate that remains undecided on the presidential ballot.

Despite this election barrage, nearly one-third of the voters say the candidates are paying little or no attention to people like themselves. Another 44 percent say that candidates are paying some attention to people like themselves, while just 21 percent say they are paying a lot of attention. Swing independent voters, surprisingly, feel even less catered to. Nearly half (48 percent) say the candidates are paying little or no attention to people like themselves, while 32 percent say the candidates are paying some attention and only 17 percent say Bush and Kerry are paying a lot of attention to people like themselves.

Labor Day, the traditional start of the campaign push may be just another day in this cycle as the airwaves are already crowded with ads, particularly in the battleground states. Roughly half of all voters have seen campaign ads 6 or more times in the last week, and the number among battleground state voters is even greater. Twenty-nine percent of voters say they have seen a political ad more than 10 times in the past week. Another fifth (20 percent) say they have seen an ad between 6 and 10 times in the past week and one-third (33 percent) have seen an ad one to five times in the past week. Not surprisingly, voters in the targeted Battleground states recall having seen an ad more often than the general electorate. Forty-six percent of these voters have seen a political ad more than 10 times in the past week, with another 22 percent having seen ads six to 10 times in the past week. Independents are also more likely to have seen ads (34 percent have seen more than 10 in the past week) than either Democrats (27 percent) or Republicans (29 percent).

Approaching half of the electorate (44 percent) say they have been contacted by one of the campaigns or the parties this cycle, this is even more notable when we consider the fact that many of the campaign, party, and independent operations do not begin their field campaigns until after Labor Day. When we look at only those voters in the battleground states, half (50 percent) say they have been contacted already. Republicans and Democrats have been contacted about equally (45 percent and 44 percent respectively) while the harder to identify independents are slightly less likely to have been contacted (41 percent). Noticeably, however, 50 percent of white evangelical voters say they have been contacted but only 26 percent of African Americans and 30 percent of Hispanics have been contacted.

The effects of the media barrage have taken a toll on both candidates, though despite relentless and intensely personal attacks from the Bush campaign and the Republicans, Kerry has fared somewhat better with the public. Forty-five percent of voters say they are more likely to vote for Kerry based on what they have seen or heard, with 34 percent saying they are much more likely to support him. This is compared to 39 percent who say they are more likely to vote for Bush based on what they have seen or heard (32 percent much more likely). Conversely, 48 percent of voters say they are less likely to vote for Bush based on what they have seen or heard (42 percent much less likely) while 45 percent say the same for Kerry (38 percent much less likely). Few see the ads neutrally – only 10 percent of the voters say what they have seen or heard about Bush will not make a difference in how they vote and 7 percent say their vote will not be affected by what they have seen or heard about Kerry.

The effect has been even stronger in the Battleground states, and more negative for the President. Half the voters (50 percent) in the battleground states say they are less likely to vote for the President based on what they have seen or heard, while just over one-third (36 percent) say they are more likely to vote for him. The effect in battleground states for Kerry is more split but is net positive: 44 percent say they are less likely to vote for the Senator while 46 percent are more likely to vote for Kerry.

Mind the Gaps – Racial, Gender, Marital, Religion

The gender gap still exists with not much movement among men since June and a slight widening among women, though not to the levels we had seen in March.

Bush's margin among men is currently +7 (52 percent to 44 percent), where it was in June, though he enjoyed a +12 advantage in March (54 percent to 42 percent).

Meanwhile, Kerry's margin among women has increased slightly, from +6 in June (51 percent to 44 percent) to +9 (53 percent to 43 percent). Among the small number of undecided voters 58 percent are women.

Bush's margin among married voters has been cut in half since June, though a marriage gap still exists. Married voters supported Bush by 12 points (54 percent to 42 percent) in our last battleground poll, compared to 6 points now (51 percent to 45 percent). Meanwhile, support for Kerry among unmarried voters has increased since June. Kerry holds a 25-point advantage with these unmarried voters (61 percent to 35 percent) compared to a 21-point advantage in June (59 percent to 38 percent).

Unmarried women remain a key base group for Kerry, 59 percent supporting and just 36 percent for Bush. Married women, however, are now even (48 percent to 48 percent) compared to a 10 point Bush advantage in June. Bush retains a 12-point advantage with married men while Kerry holds a 5-point advantage with unmarried men. Unmarried women also seem more energized with 74 percent saying they are extremely likely to vote and 40 percent say they have been contacted already.

White voters support Bush by 9 points, 52 percent to 44 percent, with not much change since June. **While Kerry has solidified his support among African Americans, increasing his current lead to an 82-point advantage over June when he led Bush with these voters by 60-points.**

Religiosity and religion are major divides in this election, although race and partisanship is an even more powerful variables. White evangelical Christians overwhelmingly support Bush, 74 percent to 24 percent. At the same time, white non-

conservative Christians support Kerry, 64 percent to 32 percent, up five points since June. Secular voters also support Kerry, 66 percent to 30 percent. Catholics are divided, with White Catholics split, 46 percent to 48 percent, narrowing from a 6-point Bush advantage in June, and non-white Catholics solidly supporting Kerry, 58 percent to 42 percent.¹

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

Democrats continue to hold a lead in the generic Congressional ballot though the margin has narrowed somewhat. This Democratic advantage has been a constant throughout this cycle. And as we have seen in individual states and districts, voters are not looking to pass a mandate for this President send his team back to Washington. In fact, we have seen in both focus groups and other survey research that voters tend to prefer to send Congressional representatives that will act independent of the President.

In the generic Congressional ballot, 46 percent of voters support the Democratic candidate while 43 percent support the Republican candidate – a margin of 3-points. The margin is identical in battleground states. Eleven percent of voters remain undecided on the Congressional ballot. Voters are also more intense in their support of the Democratic Congressional candidate. Forty-four percent of voters are solid in their support of the Democratic Congressional candidate, while 40 percent of voters are solid in their support of the Republican candidate.

Importantly, targeted voting groups, including independents (+8) and those who are undecided in the Presidential election (+13), also favor the Democrat in the Congressional ballot by healthy margins.

The Democratic base of support includes traditional base constituencies, though Democrats boast solid leads among some targeted swing groups as well. Among these are voters in the Northeast (+17-points), women (+11), African Americans (+77) and

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

Hispanics (+9), unmarried voters, including single (+27) and no longer married (+14) voters – especially unmarried women (+25), and voters in labor households (+20).