

The Battleground 2004 Poll

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Republican Strategic Analysis

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While the Ballot Stays the Same, The Race Continues to Evolve

With ten weeks remaining in the 2004 Presidential Election, the campaign remains an extremely tight and polarized race. In fact, the overall key findings are very similar to previous Battleground Surveys over the last six months with trendlines falling within the survey's margin of error.

For the Bush campaign, there is certainly good news in this latest Battleground Poll. As was pointed out in our Republican analysis last September, there are three times an incumbent can expect to see softer numbers in their reelection bid. One is the Fall a year out from the election when challengers first surface. The second is the end of the primary process as the challenger locks up the nomination. The third is in that time period between the challenger Party's convention and the incumbent Party's convention, which we find ourselves in now.

The overall data in this latest Battleground Poll confirms, at what should be a low point for any incumbent campaign, that John Kerry's presidential bid received little or no bounce from the Democratic convention. In the late June Battleground Poll, George W. Bush and John Kerry were tied at forty-eight percent (48%) apiece – the two way ballot now stands at forty-nine percent (49%) Senator Kerry – forty-seven percent (47%) President Bush. In fairness to the Kerry Campaign, his lack of any bounce coming out of the Democratic Convention is not too much of a surprise, even in relation to historic measurements, because the electorate is so polarized, with eighty-four percent (84%) already having made a “definite” choice for President. (This compares to only 64% having made a “definite” choice in the first week of September of the 1992 Presidential Campaign!)

No Democratic “Bounce”? – Maybe Just an Ounce

It should also be noted that while the Democratic Convention did not provide any significant bounce for the Kerry Campaign, it did close the “vote intensity” gap for several of the base Democratic voters groups. For example, Republican voters, who led Democratic voters in late June by four-points in saying they were “extremely” likely to vote in this November's election, now only lead by one-point. This tightening in vote

intensity was primarily driven by African American voters closing their deficit to that of White voters from twenty-one percent to eleven percent, and Union voters moving from a five-point deficit in vote intensity to White Conservative Christians to a five-point advantage.

While realistically the Bush campaign should also expect little or no bounce from the Republican Convention next week because of the polarized political environment, the initial test of success in the days following the convention may well be measured by the Bush campaign regaining the advantage with core Republican constituencies on vote intensity.

Predictors: Still Close Heading into the GOP Convention

In the strategic analysis of the Battleground Poll both in March and June, we discussed several traditional measures of public opinion that have been predictive of which party will win the Presidency and how the results of those measurements were mixed. One of those key measurements mentioned in March was “presidential job approval,” and the fact that *“in modern presidential politics every incumbent president who had a job approval rating of fifty percent (50%) or better at this point of the campaign went on to win reelection in November.”*

In our June Republican analysis it was pointed out that even if George W. Bush’s presidential job approval slipped below fifty percent he would not be doomed to lose. In fact, looking back to presidential reelection campaigns over the last twenty-five years, *“there appears to be quite a gap with the presidential job approval rankings of those incumbent Presidents who were successful in their reelection campaigns and those who were not!”* This point remained true for incumbents’ pre-convention job approval numbers throughout the years.

Jimmy Carter (Gallup August 15-18, 1980)	Approve 32%	Disapprove 55%
Ronald Reagan (Gallup August 10-13, 1984)	Approve 54%	Disapprove 38%
GHW Bush (Gallup August 21-23, 1992)	Approve 40%	Disapprove 54%
Bill Clinton (Gallup August 16-18, 1996)	Approve 52%	Disapprove 39%
G. W. Bush (Battleground August 15-17, 2004)	Approve 52%	Disapprove 46%

It should be noted, however, the increased polarization of the American electorate over the last twenty-five years as those voters not holding an opinion on presidential job approval has dropped from 13% for Carter, to 8% for Reagan, to 6% for GHW Bush, to 9% for Clinton, to 2% for George W. Bush! (This may be yet another indicator that there may not be much room for Bush to bounce in the upcoming convention.)

The second measurement that is very predictive in presidential elections, and shows some retrenchment from encouraging movement in the last Battleground Poll in June, pertains to the question addressing which presidential candidate “*would do a better job keeping America prosperous.*” The results of this measurement went from a seven-point deficit last March (Kerry 49% - Bush 42%), to a one-point lead for George W. Bush (Bush 47% - Kerry 46%), back to a three-point deficit (Kerry 48% - Bush 45%). This measurement is watched closely because the Democrats have never taken the White House unless they had a lead of seven-points or better on this measurement, and in the Battleground Poll in March, John Kerry had reached that mark.

This measurement for George W. Bush is a sign that improvement in the Nation’s economy is finally beginning to have an impact with voters, and may show some reaction to the mixed economic news of recent weeks.

The final measurement that we have found to be highly predictive of where the race stands is the “Unaided Ballot.” As opposed to the prior two measurements which appear to favor President Bush’s reelection, this measurement has continued to get slightly tighter over the last several months and appears to reflect not only the close division of the American electorate, but the higher than usual intensity of voters in this election.

In the late March Battleground Poll, Bush held a narrow lead of 43% to Kerry’s 39% (with Nader/other candidates receiving mention by 2.4% of the voters). In the late June Battleground Poll, Bush’s lead shrank to 43%, but John Kerry had gained two points and stood at 41% (Nader/other candidates still stand at 2.4%). In this most recent Battleground Poll, George W. Bush has held at 43% but John Kerry has gained another three-points, and the lead, and now stands at 44% (Nader/other candidates has shrunk to 1.1%). The five point gain in this unaided ballot for John Kerry since locking up his Party’s nomination should serve as a warning sign to the Bush campaign that John Kerry has solidified his place as the Democratic nominee. Again, this measurement not only reflects the close division of the American electorate, but the higher than usual intensity of voters in this election with only twelve percent (12%) of the respondents not naming a Presidential choice, a number lower than we usually see in the final weeks of the election.

The Presidential Race: It Can Come Down to Character

The most striking points from this most recent Battleground survey is the polarized and “October-like” intensity on all measures and how little the overall data has moved over the last six months.

- All of the presidential ballot measurements are in a statistical dead-heat; the “unaided” ballot is a statistical tie – Kerry 44%/Bush 43%, the presidential “generic” ballot is in a statistical tie – Democrats 49% /Republicans 46%, the two-way “aided” ballot is a statistical tie – Kerry 49%/Bush 47%, and the three-way “aided” ballot with Vice Presidents is a statistical tie – Kerry/Edwards 48%; Bush-Cheney 47%; Nader-Camejo 3%.
- While there has been a great deal of focus on undecided voters throughout the campaign, undecided voters remain small on all presidential ballot measurements. When compared to the voters’ traditional vote behavior, both presidential candidates are performing at expected levels with most voter groups.
- Bush continues to have a polarized name identification (51% favorable/47% unfavorable) and job approval (52% approve/46% disapprove), but holds a significant lead with voters who approve of him personally (64% approve/30% disapprove) and consistently approve of the President (49% consistently approve/28% consistently disapprove).
- While John Kerry marginally improved his overall name awareness and favorability at the Democratic Convention (54% favorable/42% unfavorable), there was no movement with voters holding a strong image of the two candidates. George W. Bush holds a one-to-one ratio (38% strongly favorable/38% strongly unfavorable), and John Kerry is slightly under a one-to-one ratio (30% strongly favorable/32% strongly unfavorable).
- There is a stalemate on issue handling (with neither candidate moving their advantage in an issue area outside the margin of error). Kerry leads on who would do a better job handling the issues of making prescription drugs affordable (Kerry +24), improving education (Kerry +6), strengthening Social Security (Kerry +13), and creating jobs (Kerry +11). Bush leads on who would do a better job handling the issues of dealing with Iraq (Bush +12), holding the line on taxes (Bush +16), and safeguarding America from a terrorist threat (Bush +17). On two additional issues, the presidential candidates are in a statistical tie – holding down federal spending (Kerry +1) and keeping America prosperous (Kerry +3).
- While John Kerry is leading on best able to handle many issues, he is not leading on many of those issues by as large of a margin as we traditionally see with Democrat presidential candidates. More importantly, on the two dominant issue

concerns of the economy and security, voters are split on who will do better with the economic issues, and Bush wins on the other key concern – terrorism.

- On the “character” measurements of the two candidates, Bush is the clear winner. George W. Bush wins strong leader (Bush +12), is honest and trustworthy (Bush +5), says what he believes (Bush +13), is a steady/consistent leader (Bush +14). Kerry only leads on cares about people like me (Kerry +6). Voters are split on who can lead the country in the right direction (Kerry +3), represents my values (Bush +1), and has plans to deal with the problems facing our country (Bush +1). If voters continue to deadlock on issues and remain polarized, these character issues, on which Bush dominates, could decide the election.

Congressional Elections: Driven by the Top-of-the-Ticket

One of the most surprising results of this latest Battleground Poll, especially in the shadow of the Democratic convention, was the tightening of the “generic” congressional ballot. While Republicans had a six-point deficit to Democrats in March, and a seven-point deficit to Democrats in June, the vote intention for Republicans closed to only three-points to Democrats in this most recent Battleground survey. The generic ballot (43% Republican/46% Democrats) does appear to be more driven by the continued polarization of the electorate and is not a sign that voters are switching their focus to congressional elections. Also, remarkably polarized – 86% of those who identify as Republicans prefer a Republican on this generic congressional ballot and 90% of those who identify as Democrats prefer a Democrat on this ballot.

In fact, the political environment looks to be shaping up as one where neither side will make significant gains. The issue agenda is truly reflected by those driven by the presidential campaign. On the most important issue for Congress to deal with, the security issues of terrorism (23%) and Iraq (13%), and the economic issues of health care/prescription drugs (12%), jobs (9%), prosperity (8%), and taxes (7%) are the dominant issues.

Conclusions

This campaign is playing out exactly as advertised – the election is an extremely close election. America is closely divided, there are two very distinct views of America, the two Parties are at parity and equally loyal to their Party’s presidential candidate, and the electorate is polarized.

Initially fueling some of the polarization of voters, the dynamic that remains in play within the electorate is the overwhelming focus on two dominant issue matrixes – the

Economy, including jobs and health care/prescription drugs and Terrorism/homeland security, including the War in Iraq.

There was a point, early in this presidential campaign, that there was potential for the Bush campaign to show substantial progress (“good news”) on both the economy and the security issues and gain traction with voters, but events were mixed to the point of never getting consistently good news on both fronts. At the same time, there was potential for negative events (“bad news”) to be exploited by the Kerry campaign to gain a substantial advantage with voters, but again there was not consistently bad news. Those opportunities appear to be drawing to a close, at least to have a dramatic impact on large segments of the electorate.

In fact, the whiplash of voters between “good news” and “bad news” on these two issues appears to be reinforcing voters’ decisions to support their candidate or vote against the other candidate, rather than playing a part in their vote decision. With neither campaign gaining traction with the voters on both issues simultaneously, and the historically low number of undecided voters (which increasingly look to be non-voters than undecided voters), the polarized political environment appears to be locking in.

All signs point to an extremely close race. On one hand, it appears that only a major shift in the economy or the war on terrorism/war in Iraq could change this dynamic. On the other hand, voters still may move from making their final decision to vote over these two dominant issues, to making their vote decision over the “character” issues that currently benefit George W. Bush. Both are possible, neither can be predicted, and this has certainly been a campaign in which major events have superseded the best-laid political strategies. Ten weeks can be a lifetime in a presidential campaign, especially one that has been so full of so many twists and turns already. This latest Battleground Poll, however, only underscores a polarized electorate that is extremely intense, with very little room for either candidate to gain an advantage. With that in mind, voter intensity and voter turnout increasing looks to be the final determinants of who will be victorious on November 2nd.