



To: Battleground Sponsors and Interested Parties

From: Celinda Lake, Daniel Gotoff, and Erica Prosser

Re: Democratic Strategic Analysis—Battleground Tracking Week 1

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### **Overview**

With both parties' national conventions over and the media refocusing on the bad news in Iraq and the economy, the Bush bounce is receding and the race is still historically close. With few exceptions, this data overwhelmingly points to just how tight this election season is shaping up to be. The bounce proclaimed by the Republicans and seen in some public polls following their convention has continued the natural course of a bounce—it's coming down and the few undecided voters are strikingly negative about the direction of the country. Meanwhile the generic Congressional ballot continues to break slightly Democratic. The race is 49 percent for Bush and 45 percent for Kerry, but, particularly in the Battleground states it is virtually tied (Bush 48 percent, Kerry 47 percent, Nader 1 percent, undecided 4 percent). The race was even 1 to 2 points closer until Wednesday night when the news of controversial National Guard documents helped Bush. The small number of undecideds suggests a race too close to call.

The structure of the election gives an opportunity to Kerry. A majority of the country continues to remain negative on the direction of the country (53 percent wrong track, 41 percent right direction), and the President's job performance continues to hover near 50 percent (52 percent approve, 45 percent disapprove). Undecided voters are noticeably

negative about the country's direction (21 percent right direction and 55 percent wrong track) and only 47 percent give Bush positive job ratings. Bush's personal ratings are only 43 percent positive among undecided voters.

The President has been somewhat successful in defining the agenda. Voters continue to say the issues the next President needs to focus on are safeguarding the country from terrorism (27 percent), followed by the war in Iraq (13 percent), and creating jobs (13 percent). The President enjoys a comfortable lead among those voters who say safeguarding from terrorism is the most important issue (+63) and all voters give Bush an advantage of 23 points on terrorism. However, more than three-quarters (77 percent) of those who say creating jobs and a majority (59 percent) of those voters who point the war in Iraq as the most important issue are supporting Kerry over Bush (+23 and +56 respectively). This includes a 12-point lead for Kerry among those voters who have a veteran in their family. Kerry also continues to hold a lead among voters who cite improving education (+25), reducing health care and prescription drug costs (+44), and strengthening Social Security (+15) as the most important issue.

However, despite the quickly deflating the convention bounce, there is still much work for Kerry and Democrats to do in solidifying support among voters who are still on the fence and shoring up the base. The campaign in August still left Kerry with negatives almost as high as his positives—49 percent favorable, 46 percent unfavorable. Bush also has a 19 point advantage on being a strong leader and despite bad news Bush has pulled ahead on doing a better job on Iraq (+16 points). Kerry must continue to assure voters he has a plan for Iraq and getting out of Iraq, and he will have to articulate that plan.

Kerry must also articulate a strong alternative on the economy and jobs which includes the health care issue—a major concern for undecided voters. Kerry has a six point advantage on being for the middle class and 7 points on jobs. Neither is where we would like it but these expand to double digits among undecided voters (though there are few undecideds left and almost half of undecideds were unsure about who would be better).

## The Presidential Contest

With a historically high number of voters focused on the election and saying they are likely to vote (95 percent, 77 percent extremely likely) and the conventions over the Presidential race is hitting its stride and remains anybody's contest. Rising death tolls in Iraq, questions about the President's own service, and a returned focus to important domestic issues has brought the brief up-tick for Bush back to an extremely polarized fight for every vote. Voters of both parties are strongly behind their candidates with Independents remaining split. Ninety-three percent of Republicans support the President (5 percent Kerry, 2 percent undecided), while 88 percent of Democrats support Kerry (7 percent Bush, 4 percent undecided). Three times (16 percent) as many Independents remain undecided as undecided voters in the general electorate overall (5 percent), while the rest of the Independents are split (42 percent Bush, 40 percent Kerry). These factors suggest a Kerry strategy of both persuading swing voters while continuing to energize the base.

GOTV will be important for both parties, given how polarized the electorate is. Democrats and Republicans are similarly energized (77 percent and 79 percent respectively say they are extremely likely to vote). However, while 74 percent of evangelicals are energized only 69 percent of African Americans are.

That said, Kerry and the Democrats have several areas in which they need to either hold or build their support:

- In the close ballot race (49 percent Bush, 45 percent Kerry) with neither candidate breaking the 50 percent mark. Five percent of the voters remain undecided.
- The race in the pivotal Battleground states is even closer (48 percent Bush, 47 percent Kerry, 4 percent undecided). And voters in the Battleground states continue to lean Democratic in the Congressional ballot (+6) suggesting there is room for Kerry to pick up support.
- In the much contested and oft-visited Midwestern states, the head-to-head is locked at 47 percent for each candidate.
- The gender gap continues, with men supporting Bush (13 points) and women supporting Kerry (4 points). Women also remain slightly more undecided (6

percent) than men (4 percent). Unmarried women continue to support Kerry (60 percent to 34 percent) and remain a key target for his election. Unmarried women are less energized than married women (73 percent extremely likely to vote to 81 percent respectively). In an electorate that is 52% female, this means women could once again decide the presidential election. But women who are security moms—give Bush an 18 point advantage on terrorism.

- A majority of voters think the country is off on the wrong track, and 82 percent of these voters are supporting Kerry.
- Core Democratic constituencies, including union voters and African-American voters, are behind Kerry. Union household support Kerry 59 percent to 34 percent and are extremely energized (84 percent extremely likely).
- Kerry has continued to solidify his support among African American voters (+85 points), up from a 60 point advantage in June. Turnout here is key.
- While Democrats still have work to do in winning over male audiences, blue-collar men are supporting Kerry (+3), as are unmarried men (+15).
- In these tough economic times, voters are focused on jobs and the economy. Voters overall continue to give Kerry a modest advantage on the key task of creating jobs (+6). He holds an even stronger lead on this measure among voters in Battleground states (+10), those in the hard-hit Midwest (+15), and among Independents (+17). Kerry is also seen as better on representing middle class values (+5). Women, who traditionally vote economic issues, give Kerry a 16-point advantage on jobs. However, women voters this year are more focused on security.

## The Congressional Elections

Democrats continue to hold a narrow advantage in the generic congressional ballot as they have all summer. However, underneath the overall numbers, Democrats have significant strengths.

- The congressional gender gap is smaller than the presidential gender gap. Democrats are only narrowly losing men in the generic congressional ballot (-5), and are winning women (+11) – particularly working women (+12), Independent women (+15), and unmarried women (+28). Unmarried men are also supporting the Democrats by a solid margin (+22).
- Democrats are winning both seniors (+4) and younger voters (+4), and in fact hold a lead in all but one age group (those 35 to 44 are -4-points).
- Democrats continue to receive solid support among core constituencies, including African-American voters (+78) and union voters (+33).

- Key swing voters include independents, who favor Congressional Democrats by a 10 point margin, and married women, who favor Congressional Republicans by only a 2-point margin. The Midwest continues to lean Democrat Congressionally (+12) as well as in the Presidential race.
- The Battleground states continue to lean Democratic (+6 points) in the Congressional race also.