



To: Battleground Sponsors and Interested Parties
From: Celinda Lake, Daniel Gotoff, and Erica Prosser
Re: Democratic Strategic Analysis—Battleground Tracking Week 2
Date: September 26, 2004

Overview

Bush's convention bounce having all but dissipated, the race has returned to a narrow margin with intense division and polarization on either side, and it is even closer in the Battleground states. The race is still a toss-up as the candidates head into the next, and perhaps last, defining phase of this campaign – the debates.

The electorate remains exceedingly engaged as the campaigns head into the final month, with more than three-quarters of voters saying they are extremely likely to vote (79 percent), and another 19 percent saying they are very likely to vote. Among those who are most engaged are the voters who have been the target of so much attention from the campaigns and who will most likely decide this election – voters in Battleground states (98 percent extremely or very likely to vote) and independent voters, (95 percent). And contrary to typical patterns where late deciding voters are often non-voters, this year even the small amount of voters who are undecided on the Presidential ballot are engaged (93 percent), and this potentially bodes badly for the President given their negative feelings towards the direction of the country.

Despite a narrow lead, the fundamental measures of Bush's presidency are troubling for the incumbent. A majority of voters continues to remain negative on the direction of the country. Fifty-three percent of the electorate say the country is off on the wrong track compared to just over one-third (38 percent) who think it is headed in the right direction, down from just last week. And there is considerably greater intensity on the majority position: 42 percent of voters feel strongly that the country is headed in the wrong direction, while just 26 percent feel strongly that the country is headed in the right direction. And it is not surprising that the positive numbers on the direction of the country are driven in large part by Republicans already consolidated behind the President. The deciding voter groups are far less optimistic – particularly undecided voters (66 percent wrong track, 17 percent right direction). Voters in Battleground states and independents are similarly discouraged (53 percent negative to 39 percent positive and 54 percent negative to 31 percent positive, respectively).

The candidates have seen little change in their personal image ratings this week, with both Bush and Kerry seeing a margin improvement in their favorability ratings. Currently, 55 percent have a favorable impression of Bush (42 percent unfavorable) and 50 percent have a favorable impression of Kerry (46 percent unfavorable). Bush's job approval numbers remain polarized, but are nevertheless some of the best news for the President in this data. Fifty-three percent of voters approve of the job he is doing and 45 percent disapprove.

The numbers among undecided voters, however, tell a different story. While the sample of undecided voters is small, they appear to like Kerry better than Bush. Among undecided voters, 44 percent have a favorable impression of Bush (33 percent unfavorable and 23 percent have no opinion) and 48 percent have a favorable impression of Kerry (29 percent unfavorable and 23 percent have no opinion).

The Head-to-Head

The race remains close, the vote remains split among the electorate, with Bush receiving 50 percent of the vote and Kerry 45 percent, 5 percent remain undecided. Looking at the

swing voting blocs reveals an even tighter race. In the Battleground states the race is at a virtual tie (Bush 49 percent, Kerry 48 percent, 3 percent undecided), with strong support favoring Kerry (41 percent strongly support Bush, 42 percent strongly support Kerry). And a majority of those voters in the coveted Midwest states are supporting John Kerry (51 percent Kerry, 43 percent Bush). Bush currently enjoys a 10-point lead among independents, yet a disproportionately high share of independents (17 percent) remain undecided in the race.

The gender gap continues to be at play, though men are currently more supportive of Bush (+14 points) than women are of Kerry (+5 points). Women will hold the key to the election and the data suggests the Kerry campaign has strong potential to improve with subgroups of women—a focus on a few particular groups could tip the election for Kerry—especially white non-college educated women in Battleground states. Unmarried women continue to support Kerry by a wide margin (58 percent to 35 percent) and remain a key turnout target. Unmarried women (58 percent of the undecided voters) are one of the groups that need to turn out in large numbers to ensure a Kerry victory, the current data bodes well for this as this group continues to become more energized as the election looms (79 percent extremely likely to vote compared to 73 percent just last week).

The Issue Agenda and Dimensions of Leadership

The electorate continues to focus on a limited issue agenda for the next President, including safeguarding the country from terrorism (23 percent say it is the most important issues for the next President to focus on), creating jobs (13 percent), and the war in Iraq (12 percent). Pocketbook economics are taking a back seat to these issues, with just 9 percent of voters pointing to the high cost of health care and prescription drugs as their top concern (9 percent). With the national agenda focus primarily on issues of safety and security, presidential leadership is being defined along these lines. Kerry's decision to engage Bush on this turf is in part designed to eat away at the President's persistently strong advantages on safeguarding America from terrorist threats (+23-point Bush advantage), dealing with the war in Iraq (+15), and being a strong leader (+21). It is noticeable, however, that Bush's advantages on all three measures are narrower (about 5

points in each group) among voters in the Battleground states. Also noteworthy is the finding that Bush's national margin on Iraq has declined slightly from last week (when it was +18) and voters who say the war in Iraq is the most important issue for the next President to deal with continue to support Kerry by a strong 27-point margin. These are measures we will monitor throughout the debates – the public's chance to have a relatively unvarnished comparison of the two men.

On the key issue of creating jobs in this country, Kerry continues to hold a 6-point advantage. This advantage is even stronger among undecided voters, as well as in the economically hard hit Midwestern states (+22-point Kerry advantage), the Battleground states (+20-point Kerry advantage), among independent voters (+15-point Kerry advantage), and especially among those voters who name creating jobs as the most important issue for the next President to address (+67-point Kerry advantage). If Kerry and the Democrats can successfully broaden the definition of leadership to jobs and economic security, it would create an opportunity for Kerry to make further gains.

Bush's advantage on sharing voters' values is just 7 points and voters are even more divided on who would do a better job leading the country in the right direction (+5-point Bush advantage) and keeping America prosperous (+3-point Bush advantage). In fact, Kerry holds a slim 2-point advantage on keeping America prosperous in the Battleground states.

At this point in the closely divided campaign it still appears that GOTV efforts could decide the election. This is particularly true given how polarized the electorate is. Democrats and Republicans are similarly energized (78 percent and 80 percent respectively say they are extremely likely to vote). However, Democrats need to continue their efforts to energize base groups to levels equal to or higher than Republican base groups. For example, while 78 percent of evangelicals are energized only 70 percent of African Americans are.

The Congressional Elections

Democrats maintain a lead in the generic Congressional ballot, but it has narrowed now from a 2-point advantage to just a 1-point advantage. Forty-four percent of voters support the Democrat, 43 percent support the Republican, and 13 percent are undecided. In Battleground states, the Congressional trial heat is even, 44 percent to 44 percent. So as we head in the final month of this election cycle – and into the debates – everything appears to be on the table, everything appears to be in play.