

# THE CENTURY FOUNDATION

## public opinion watch

by ruy teixeira

**June 16, 2004**

(Covering polls and related articles from the week of June 7–13, 2004.)

In this edition of *Public Opinion Watch*:

- [Reagan's Death Fails to Boost GOP](#)
- [Gallup Delivers Bad News for President Bush](#)
- [Students for Kerry](#)

[Click here](#) for an index of previous *Public Opinion Watch* topics.

### Reagan's Death Fails to Boost GOP

[Los Angeles Times poll of 3,665 adults \(1,477 nationwide and the rest in the three midwestern battleground states of Missouri, Ohio, and Wisconsin\)](#), released June 9, 2004 (conducted June 5–8, 2004)

---

The *Los Angeles Times* has released a major new national poll that includes oversamples in three battleground states, Ohio, Missouri, and Wisconsin. And it provides little evidence that the “Reagan death bounce” the GOP was hoping for is materializing. In fact, Kerry’s seven-point lead among registered voters (RVs) in this poll (51 percent to 44 percent), conducted entirely since Reagan’s death, is actually larger than Kerry’s lead in a recent Gallup poll (see below) that only partially overlapped the period since Reagan’s death.

The breakdown of the horse race data provides some interesting results. Bush’s current advantage among men is almost nonexistent (49 percent to 48 percent), while he is behind by thirteen points (40 percent to 53 percent) among women. Kerry is ahead by ten points among eighteen- to twenty-nine-year olds, consistent with the lead he has had among young voters in most polls. And he has a two-to-one advantage among moderates (60 percent to 32 percent), though, interestingly, and in contrast to other recent polls I’ve seen, he runs slightly behind among independents (46 percent to 49 percent; note, however, that among *moderate* independents, Kerry has a huge 63 percent to 31 percent lead). In terms of the three battleground states where the *Los Angeles Times* oversampled, Kerry is losing 42 percent to 48

---

The Century Foundation conducts public policy research and analyses of economic, social, and foreign policy issues, including inequality, retirement security, election reform, media studies, homeland security, and international affairs. The foundation produces books, reports, and other publications, convenes task forces, and working groups and operates eight informational Web sites. With offices in New York City and Washington, D.C., The Century Foundation is nonprofit and nonpartisan and was founded in 1919 by Edward A. Filene.

percent in Missouri, dead-even in Wisconsin (44 percent to 44 percent), and ahead 46 percent to 45 percent in Ohio).

And here's a startling result from their generic congressional ballot question: Democrats are favored over Republicans by an amazing 54 percent to 35 percent margin, including three-to-one among moderates (60 percent to 20 percent) and even 51 percent to 38 percent among male voters.

In terms of direction of the country, the classic right direction/wrong track question is heavily negative (34 percent right direction/58 percent wrong track). And a related question, "Do you think the country is better off because of George W. Bush's policies and should proceed in the direction he set out, or do you think the country is not better off and needs to move in a new direction?" also returns a resoundingly negative 39 percent to 56 percent verdict, including 26 percent to 61 percent among moderates and 35 percent to 58 percent in Ohio.

Bush does get an approval rating that is high by his recent standards (51 percent). He is, however, net negative among independents (48 percent approval/50 percent disapproval) and moderates (44 percent/52 percent) and only 48 percent/48 percent in Ohio. His other approval ratings are unimpressive, if a tad higher than in other recent public polls: 54 percent/42 percent on the war on terrorism; 44 percent/55 percent on Iraq; and 43 percent/54 percent on the economy (as the *Los Angeles Times* notes, essentially unchanged since their last poll in late March, despite the past several months of pretty good job growth).

In the poll, almost half of respondents (49 percent) now say they have an unfavorable impression of Bush, compared to exactly half who say they have a favorable impression, for a razor-thin +1 net rating. Kerry, in contrast, is only viewed unfavorably by 32 percent, compared to 51 percent who view him favorably, for a +19 net rating. Note that this relationship is replicated in Ohio, where Bush is +1 on favorability and Kerry is +16.

The poll also provides a series of Bush-Kerry comparisons on traits and issues, which were generated by giving respondents a series of statements and asking them whether each statement applies more to Bush or Kerry.

It is interesting to compare Kerry's worst area ("he flip-flops on the issue") to Bush's worst area ("he is too ideological and stubborn"). By almost two to one (48 percent to 25 percent), voters felt flip-flopping applies more to Kerry, but by well over three to one (58 percent to 16 percent), voters felt being too ideological and stubborn applies more to Bush (57 percent to 14 percent among independents and 64 percent to 11 percent among moderates). Given the pragmatic, problem-solving orientation of American voters, that seems like an exceptionally poor position for Bush to be in.

It's also worth noting that Bush's numbers in his second-worst area ("he has better ideas for handling the problems of cost and access to health care") are also worse (51-24 against him; including 50-19 among independents and 63-11 among moderates) than Kerry's numbers in the flip-flopping area.

Other good areas for Kerry are “he has better ideas for strengthening the nation’s economy” (48 percent to 37 percent in his favor, including 46 percent to 31 percent in Ohio) and “he cares about people like me” (47 percent to 35 percent, including 45 percent to 31 percent in Ohio), while good areas for Bush are “he would be best at keeping the country safe from terrorism” (50 percent to 31 percent in his favor) and “he shares my moral values” (45 percent to 36 percent).

Finally, note that Bush has no advantage at all on “he will be a strong leader for the country” (44 percent to 44 percent) and only a one point advantage on “he has the honesty and integrity to serve as president” (41 percent to 40 percent). For a president whose stock in trade used to be the strong leader who told it like it was, that’s not very encouraging news.

But more encouraging than this: by 52 percent to 22 percent, voters say the country is worse off, rather than better off, due to the economic policies pursued by Bush in the past three years. And it’s an essentially identical 52 percent to 23 percent verdict on that question in Ohio.

These are obviously not good findings for Bush and the Republicans. Not surprisingly, Republican operatives, particularly Matthew Dowd, chief pollster for the Republican National Committee, have been actively seeking to discredit results of the *Los Angeles Times* poll. In essence, their criticism of the poll comes down to this: there are too many Democrats in the poll, which explains how Kerry can be leading Bush by seven points, despite losing to Bush among independents and having a smaller margin among Democrats than Bush has among Republicans, and how the Democrats can be nineteen points ahead in the generic congressional ballot.

And it is true, as the *Los Angeles Times* pollster Susan Pinkus has admitted, that the current poll has a relatively large thirteen-point Democratic advantage on party identification (the sample is 38 percent Democrats, 25 percent Republicans, and 24 percent independents). It could be true that there is some problem with the poll that led to oversampling of Democrats (though, since this is an registered voter (RV) poll, not a likely voter (LV) poll, there is no obvious culprit for this problem). Or it could be plain old sampling error—the mean of this poll just happens to be unusually far away from the true population figure. Or it could be there is a surge toward the Democrats that is driving up the number of Democratic identifiers among voters and enhancing the Democrats’ party identification advantage. (Or it could be a combination of the second and third explanations: there is a surge toward the Democrats *and* sampling error in the *Los Angeles Times* poll produced an unusually high number of Democrats, even given that Democratic surge.)

Of course, no one can prove anything here. But I, for one, find these figures (the Democratic party identification advantage and generic congressional ballot advantage) generally plausible, if perhaps a bit on the high side. There are ample grounds for thinking there is, in fact, a surge toward the Democrats and their positions and away from the Republicans and their positions among the broad electorate. A growing Democratic party identification advantage is a logical consequence of that surge, since party identification does not remain stable as political conditions change.

Indeed, the Democratic party identification advantage has been larger than generally believed in

the last several years because surges in *Republican* party identification—in the period right after September 11 and then in the initial, successful phase of the Iraq war—have been widely discussed, while surges back toward the Democrats typically have been ignored. That’s the context within which to consider the *Los Angeles Times* poll’s current thirteen-point lead for the Democrats, as well as other recent big leads for the Democrats in public polls (a recent ABC News poll gave the Democrats a ten-point party identification lead and a January CBS News/*New York Times* poll gave the Democrats a thirteen-point lead—though note that this latter figure included leaners). That’s also the context to apply to the Democrats’ big advantage on the generic congressional ballot; public polls have been showing that advantage growing steadily for quite awhile and a number of polls have shown the Democrats with double-digit leads (though, admittedly, none has shown a lead as high as the *Los Angeles Times* poll’s).

What is the conclusion? There is no good reason to ignore the results of this poll (unless you’re Matthew Dowd, of course, who has his own reasons for doing so). Like all polls, it should be taken with a grain of salt and considered in relationship to other polls. But there’s no need, in my view, to be any more stringent than that.

That’s my view and it’s also the view of Susan Pinkus, Director of the *Los Angeles Times* poll, who had this to say about Dowd’s allegations. Note especially her point about not weighting by party identification, as well as the useful time series data on party identification in the *Los Angeles Times* poll, which clearly show that the Democrats’ current thirteen point lead is *not* out of line with previous data collected by her poll.

After reading Matthew Dowd’s assessment of the *Los Angeles Times* Poll in ABC News’ *The Note*, I feel that I have to respond to his assertion that the poll is a “mess.” His negative spin of this poll is, quite truthfully, not unexpected. The *Times* makes every effort to use sound methodological techniques that are used by most reputable research and polling organizations. The questionnaire and methodology is available for anyone to see and conforms to the guidelines set forth by the National Council on Public Polls and the American Association for Public Opinion Research. Although Dowd does not like the results of the *Times* poll, I stand behind the poll’s results and the sound statistical methods used.

If Dowd doesn’t like the *Times* results, did he have a problem with the latest Gallup and CBS/*New York Times* polls? The horserace numbers are similar to the results of these two latest polls. Gallup had Kerry ahead by 5 points in the two-way race and CBS had Kerry up by 8 points.

The *Times* does RDD (random digit dialing) sampling which reaches households with listed and unlisted telephone numbers. The poll weights slightly (for minor corrections) based on census data for sex, race, age and education and does not weight for party ID. Party ID is a moving variable that changes from one election to another, and weighting by party registration makes no sense nationally because many states don’t have their voters register by party and some states don’t have voters register to vote until the day of the election.

Here is the breakdown of party affiliation in Times polls going back to September 2001:

DATE	N/WAY	DEM	IND	REP	S/ELSE	D/KNOW
06/04	4	38	24	25	7	2
03/04	4	33	26	25	10	2
11/03	5	31	25	26	12	3
04/03	3	38	19	26	10	4
02/03	4	28	30	26	10	4
12/02	4	33	28	27	9	2
08/02	3	35	26	28	8	3
02/02	6	31	26	27	11	2
11/01	5	34	28	25	10	4
09/01	5	38	20	26	8	3

As you can see, the numbers are pretty similar to one another (all within the margins of error).

It is also interesting to me that if the poll is “a mess,” why is he reporting data from the poll—results that hopefully make his point? Why doesn’t he report that the job approval ratings are very similar to those that other polling firms are finding? For example, a new Fox poll released today shows Bush’s job approval 48 percent to 45 percent disapproval. Annenberg’s numbers show Bush’s approval to disapproval ratings at 48 percent to 49 percent. The *Times* poll has Bush’s positive to negative ratings 51 percent to 47 percent. Annenberg also had Bush handling the situation in Iraq at 40 percent approve and 56 percent disapprove; the *Times* poll shows 44 percent and 55 percent. Annenberg has Bush handling the nation’s economy at 41 percent to 55 percent; the *Times* had 43 percent to 54 percent.

However, if you look at all the questions, not just the horserace, there is uneasiness about what is happening to the country (56 percent think the country would be better off if it moved in a new direction, 58 percent think the country is seriously off on the wrong track—which most polls are showing) and doubts about President Bush’s presidency. On the other hand, Kerry needs to do better than he is about what his proposals are. Which will win stability or change—we’ll know on Nov. 2.

Well said, Ms. Pinkus.

## Gallup Delivers Bad News for President Bush

David W. Moore, "[Kerry With Slight Lead in Presidential Race](#)," Gallup Organization, June 8, 2004

---

Gallup released their latest poll today on June 8, and it contains mostly bad news for the president. And the poll, which was conducted June 3–6, and therefore partly overlapped with the period after Reagan's death, certainly shows little evidence of a "Reagan death bounce" for Bush, as was also true of the later *Los Angeles Times* poll (see above).

Turning first to the horse race numbers, Kerry leads Bush by five points among RVs (49 percent to 44 percent), up from a two-point lead in their May 21–23 poll. It's also interesting to note that, for the second straight poll, Gallup's LV numbers (a six-point, 50 percent to 44 percent lead for Kerry) closely match their RV numbers.

Gallup helpfully provides a solid red/purple (swing)/solid blue state breakdown of the Kerry–Bush RV matchup. That breakdown shows Kerry with a very healthy lead in the solid blue states (57 percent to 37 percent) and Bush with a surprisingly modest one in the solidly red states (48 percent to 44 percent). And, most critical to Kerry's electoral chances, he replicates his national lead of five points in the purple states (49 percent to 44 percent).

The poll shows Bush with a modest uptick in his overall approval rating (up two points in the last two weeks to 49 percent, with disapproval remaining steady at 49 percent). But his approval rating on the economy, [despite the recent pretty good job numbers](#), has not budged since early May and remains mired at 41 percent. In fact, this latest poll shows his disapproval rating on the economy actually going up slightly (by two points, to 58 percent) in the last two weeks.

Bush's approval rating on handling terrorism remains his relative strong point at 56 percent—but even that, of course, is way down from the gaudy ratings of 65 percent and above he consistently received until this spring. And his rating on Iraq is essentially unchanged from a month ago at a very poor 41 percent approval/57 percent disapproval. His rating on handling foreign affairs is only slightly better at 44 percent/54 percent.

But his worst ratings are in two domestic areas of potentially large significance to November's outcome: energy policy and prescription drugs for seniors. In both areas, he receives identically abysmal 33 percent approval/58 percent disapproval ratings. The energy policy rating suggests that high gas prices are indeed hurting Bush politically and the prescription drugs rating indicates that the new discount drug cards are not—despite the predictions of various Republican operatives—improving public perceptions of Bush's performance in this area.

## Students for Kerry

**Peter D. Hart Research Associates poll of 800 college students for the Leon & Sylvia Panetta Institute for Public Policy**, released June 9, 2004 (conducted April 28–May 2, 2004)

---

The Leon and Sylvia Panetta Institute for Public Policy has released a new poll of (four-year) college students, conducted by Hart Research. The findings confirm **earlier poll results** that suggest college students, as with young voters in general, are leaning strongly toward the Democrats and Kerry.

In terms of party identification, Democrats currently enjoy a healthy lead among students of fourteen points (44 percent to 30 percent).

In the poll's prospective ballot question, Kerry leads Bush by twelve points (42 percent to 30 percent) among students, with just 4 percent going to Nader (note that Kerry's lead is actually slightly larger—thirteen points (45 percent to 32 percent)—among students who are registered voters). Kerry's support is broad and includes leads among men (seven points) and among whites (eight points).

College students also favor Kerry over Bush on a wide range of characteristics. By twenty-eight points, they think Kerry better understands the needs of college students; by eighteen points, they believe he "cares about people like me"; by twelve points, they think that he is honest and truthful; by ten points, they believe that he is personally likable; by nine points, they feel that he can get things done; and by six points, they think that he would use good judgement in a crisis. Bush receives advantages only on "willing to take a stand, even if it is unpopular (eight points) and being a strong leader (one point).

On issues, Kerry's advantages are even more pronounced. Bush has a lead only on defending the country from future terrorist attacks (thirteen points). But Kerry leads on protecting the environment (forty-five points), improving education (twenty-seven points), dealing with the costs of college education (twenty-seven points), improving the health care system (twenty-six points), improving the jobs situation (twenty-four points) and "making wise decisions about what to do in Iraq" (four points).

Finally, consistent with other polls, college students support allowing gay marriage (52 percent to 38 percent) and overwhelmingly oppose a constitutional amendment to ban such marriages (63 percent to 29 percent).

The only bad news here for Kerry and the Democrats is that students express increasingly low levels of confidence in the efficacy of voting in presidential elections as a way to bring about social change. That kind of attitude could contribute to keeping turnout down, when the Democrats would clearly benefit from as high turnout as possible among college students.

On the other hand, the survey found that college students overwhelmingly were convinced that the outcome of this particular election would really matter for making progress on the important

issues facing the country—more convinced, in fact, than the public as a whole. That suggests that Democrats may be able to mobilize students based on their clear understanding of the stakes of this election.

---

*Ruy Teixeira is a Senior Fellow at The Century Foundation and a Fellow at The Center for American Progress.*

Public Opinion Watch covers newly released polls, as well as key newspaper and magazine articles that make use of polling data. If you've ever wondered what to make of the blizzard of survey data covered in the newspapers—and whether the newspapers themselves know what they're talking about—you'll want to check out this feature on a regular basis. Each edition will combine noteworthy findings and trends from the latest polling data with analysis of the misinterpretations and misrepresentations to which polling data are so often subject. This and other publications can be found at The Century Foundation Web site: [www.tcf.org](http://www.tcf.org).