

THE CENTURY FOUNDATION

public opinion watch

by ruy teixeira

June 22, 2005

(Covering polls and related articles from the week of June 6–19, 2005)

In this edition of *Public Opinion Watch*:

Can Bush's First Sub-40 Percent Approval Rating Be Far Away? Bush Losing His Strong Suit

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

Can Bush's First Sub-40 Approval Rating Be Far Away?

The latest round of public polls confirms the continuing, across-the-board weakening of public confidence in Bush and his administration suggested by the early June *Washington Post/ABC News* poll (see below). If present trends continue, it will not be long before Bush receives his first sub-40 percent overall approval rating, a traditional marker of an incumbent administration in serious trouble.

Key findings from these recent polls include:

Overall Approval Rating

Bush's overall approval rating has sunk to 42 percent in two recent polls, [CBS News/New York Times](#) and [Pew Research Center](#). In a third, [Ipsos-AP](#), he is down to 43 percent.

Right Direction/Wrong Track

In the CBS/*New York Times* poll, just 33 percent think that the country is going in the right direction and 61 percent think that it is seriously off on the wrong track (26 percent/64 percent among independents). In the Ipsos-AP poll, the analogous figures are 35 percent right direction/59 percent wrong track.

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.

HEADQUARTERS: 41 EAST 70TH STREET – NEW YORK, NY 10021 – 212.535.4441 – 212.535.7534 (FAX) – INFO@TCF.ORG
DC OFFICE: 1333 H STREET, NW – 10TH FLOOR – WASHINGTON, D.C. 20005 – 202.387.0400 – 202.483.9430 (FAX) – INFO@TCF.ORG

www.tcf.org

Bush's Priorities

In the CBS/*New York Times* poll, the public says, by a wide margin (61 percent to 35 percent), that Bush does not have the same priorities for the country as they have.

Iraq

In one of the most startling negative findings in recent polls, Gallup has detected a precipitous drop in basic support for the Iraq war. Here's the lead from [Gallup's report on their new poll](#):

According to the latest CNN/*USA Today*/Gallup survey, 59% of Americans oppose the war with Iraq, while just 39 percent favor it—a substantial change from a March poll, when the public was evenly divided, 47% in favor and 47% opposed. This is the first time that a majority has expressed opposition to the war on this question, although these results parallel the findings from a June 6–8 Gallup Poll, which found 56% of Americans saying it was not worth going to war in Iraq, and 59% supporting at least a partial withdrawal of troops from that country.

The decline in support for the war is found among Republicans and independents, with little change among Democrats. A substantial majority of Republicans continue to support the war, but the percentage in favor (70%) is 11 percentage points lower than it was in March (81%). Among independents, support has dropped by eight points (from 40% to 32%).

Similarly, the CBS/*New York Times* poll now finds a majority of the public believing the United States should have stayed out of Iraq to begin with (51 percent), rather than that military action was the right thing to do (45 percent). And 60 percent now think that efforts to bring stability and order to Iraq are going badly, a level only reached once before, at the height of the Abu Ghraib prison scandal.

Consistent with these sentiments, most polls now have Bush's approval rating on Iraq at its lowest levels ever recorded. For example, the CBS/*New York Times* poll has Bush's Iraq approval rating at just 37 percent, with 59 percent disapproval. This includes two-to-one disapproval among independents (62 percent/31 percent).

Social Security

Bush's Social Security efforts continue to tank and his proposal, if not actually dead, is certainly very close. The CBS/*New York Times* poll reports the following:

1. Bush's approval rating on Social Security is down to a shockingly low 25 percent, with 62 percent disapproval (20 percent/65 percent among independents). Even among Republicans, he can only muster a 52 percent approval rating on this issue.
2. The public overwhelmingly says it is uneasy (66 percent), rather than confident (27 percent), about Bush's ability to make the right decisions concerning Social Security.

3. By more than three-to-one (45 percent to 13 percent), people say that the more they've heard about the Bush administration's Social Security proposals, the less, rather than more, they've liked them. Another 37 percent say hearing more about the proposals hasn't changed their original opinion.
4. Two versions of Bush's proposal (neither of which mentions Bush's name, which tends to further depress support) are rejected as bad ideas. The first version is rejected 50 percent to 45 percent, while the second, which adds language about "a small number of authorized investment funds" is rejected even more soundly, 56 percent to 35 percent. Positing a cut in guaranteed benefits or large government borrowing to set up the new program sharply reduces even these anemic levels of support to 22 percent and 12 percent, respectively.
5. People basically don't believe Bush's proposal would do much good. In fact, they are much more likely to believe it would be harmful. Just 25 percent believe that his proposal would improve the financial situation of the Social Security system, compared to 36 percent who believe that it would make that situation worse. And by an overwhelming 61 percent to 30 percent margin, the public believes that Bush's changes to Social Security will make people worse off, not better off. That includes a 54 percent to 35 percent margin even among those who believe his changes will mostly affect young people.

People are also skeptical many will make profits from Social Security money invested on their own. Just 18 percent expect this to happen compared to 46 percent who expect losses to be suffered.

6. To the extent that anyone will benefit from Bush's changes, people strongly believe that high income people (56 percent), rather than middle income people (21 percent), will be the primary beneficiaries.
7. People also don't believe Bush is going to succeed in making these proposed changes. By 64 percent to 27 percent, they believe that he will fail.
8. Nor does throwing Bush's progressive indexing of benefits idea into the mix change opinions much. By 48 percent to 43 percent, the public rejects a description of Bush's proposal that includes this idea. Indeed, the specific idea of having future Social Security benefits grow more slowly for those making \$20,000 or over than they do now, when tested separately, generates overwhelming opposition (61 percent to 31 percent).

The Economy

Pessimism about the economy continues to grip the American public. In the CBS/*New York Times* poll, twice as many (36 percent) say that the economy is getting worse as say that it is getting better (18 percent). And a **recent Gallup report** finds that confidence in the stock market is continuing to sink and that views on economic growth prospects are at a two year low.

Not surprisingly, Bush's economic approval rating continues to be strongly negative (39 percent/56 percent in the CBS/*New York Times* poll, including 31 percent/60 percent among independents).

Social Issues

According to the Pew poll, at this point more of the public believes the Republicans are too conservative on social issues (38 percent), than believe the Democrats are too liberal on these issues (35 issues). (Roughly the same pattern, incidentally, obtains in the public's views on the parties and economic issues.)

Independents are particularly likely to believe that Republicans are too conservative on social issues (38 percent), rather than that the Democrats are too liberal (29 percent). More generally, on a six point ideological scale (1 = very conservative; 6 = very liberal), independents place themselves (3.6) twice as far away from Republicans (2.8) as from Democrats (4.0).

These numbers show that if you're wrong enough for long enough, the public will indeed punish you. Contrary to the impression one sometimes gets from the mainstream media, neither Bush nor the alleged political geniuses who advise him have magical powers that will allow them to stave off this punishment. The only "magic" they ever had was the political support generated by September 11 and its immediate aftermath. And that's starting to run out.

Bush below 40? You read it here first.

Bush Losing His Strong Suit

The June 2-5 Washington Post/ABC News poll had some very bad news for Bush and the GOP—even by the standards of recent polls, most of which have not been kind to the president and his party. Here's the lead from ABC News polling director Gary Langer's analysis of the poll:

The corrosive effects of the war in Iraq and a growing disconnect on political priorities have pushed George W. Bush's performance ratings—notably on terrorism—to among the worst of his career, casting a pall over his second term and potentially over his party's prospects ahead.

For the first time, most Americans, 55 percent, say Bush has done more to divide than to unite the country. A career-high 52 percent disapprove of his job performance overall, and, in another first, a bare majority rates him unfavorably on a personal level. Most differ with him on issues ranging from the economy and Social Security to stem-cell research and nuclear power.

Iraq is a major thorn. With discontent over U.S. casualties at a new peak, a record 58 percent say the war there was not worth fighting. Nearly two-thirds think the United States has gotten bogged down in Iraq, up 11 points since March. Forty-five percent go

so far as to foresee the equivalent of another Vietnam.

Fifty-two percent, the first majority to say so, think the Iraq war has failed to improve the long-term security of the United States, its fundamental rationale. *As an extension—and perhaps most hazardously in political terms—approval of Bush’s handling of terrorism, the base of his support, has lost 11 points since January to match its low, 50 percent in June 2004 when it was pressured both by the presidential campaign and the kidnapping and slaying of American Paul Johnson in Saudi Arabia (emphasis added).*

Lo, how the mighty have fallen! When disapproval (49 percent) is almost as high as approval (50 percent) in Bush’s strongest area (the handling of terrorism), you know things are going very poorly indeed for the incumbent and his administration. Consider some other results from the poll not alluded to in the Langer excerpt above.

1. Disapproval of Bush’s performance far outweighs approval on Social Security (62 percent to 34 percent), on the economy (58 percent to 40 percent), on Iraq (58 percent to 41 percent) and on stem cell research (55 percent to 33 percent).
2. The drop in Bush’s approval rating on fighting terrorism has been most pronounced among political independents. In March, 63 percent of this group approved of Bush’s performance in this area. That dropped to 54 percent in April and has sunk to a mere 40 percent this month. Independents are also pushing the rise in sentiment that the Iraq war has not made America safer; today around 60 percent endorse that view.
3. By 61 percent to 37 percent, the public believes that Bush and the Republicans are not making good progress on solving the nation’s problems. And, among those who believe progress is not being made, the blame is far more likely to be pinned on Bush and Republicans themselves (67 percent) than on the Democrats in Congress (13 percent).
4. On Social Security, just 27 percent support introducing private accounts within Social Security if these accounts are accompanied by a reduction in the rate of growth of guaranteed benefits. By 56 percent to 32 percent, the public believes that such a change in Social Security would decrease, not increase, the overall retirement income most seniors receive. And, by 63 percent to 32 percent, they believe that Bush’s proposals for Social Security would not improve the long-term financial stability of the system.
5. By five points (46 percent to 41 percent), the public believes that Democrats can do a better job coping with the main problems facing the nation in the next few years. Prior to the 2002 Congressional elections, Republicans were consistently running ahead of the Democrats on this measure.
6. By two to one (65 percent to 33 percent), the public does not believe that the Bush administration has a clear plan for eventually withdrawing from Iraq.
7. As Bush’s second terms began, Americans, by 55 percent to 29 percent, expected Bush to do a better job in his second term than in his first. The last several months have

dashed that sense of optimism. Now only 30 percent expect him to do better, actually less than the number (38 percent) who expect him to do worse.

8. Is Bush concentrating on things that are important to “you personally”? The public, by a 58 percent to 41 percent margin, says no.

It’s difficult to look at these and other recent data and perceive much the Bush administration currently has going for it, other than general support for the war on terror. And, as we’ve seen, faith that Bush knows what he’s doing has now been sharply eroded even in this area.

That just doesn’t leave the GOP with much to brag about to voters. No wonder so many Republicans running for reelection in 2006 are acting so nervous!

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.