

# THE CENTURY FOUNDATION

## public opinion watch

by ruy teixeira

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(Covering polls and related articles from the week of *April 4–10, 2005.*)

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### **Mr. Unpopularity**

Wow! Three new polls are unanimous: Bush and his agenda continue to slide in popularity in all kinds of ways.

Start with [the new Hotline/Westhill Partners poll](#). The basic message of this poll is aptly summarized by the lead paragraph of [the report on the poll](#):

As President Bush approaches the 100-day mark of his second term, the latest Westhill Partners/Hotline poll asked voters to assess the administration’s performance to date. With growing uncertainty about the economy, the administration’s ongoing efforts to sell its Social Security reform plan to the public, and the continuing war in Iraq, President Bush is experiencing declining support—especially among Independent voters—on key domestic and foreign policy issues. On almost all broad metrics—including overall approval, right/wrong track of country, and the economy—Bush’s numbers trend in a negative direction.

In other words, we are a nation of rather unhappy campers. Let’s look at some of the specific findings from the poll.

1. Right direction/wrong track is at just 30 percent right direction/56 percent wrong track (28

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**HEADQUARTERS:** 41 EAST 70TH STREET – NEW YORK, NY 10021 – 212.535.4441 – 212.535.7534 (FAX) – [INFO@TCF.ORG](mailto: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](mailto:INFO@TCF.ORG)

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percent/58 percent among independents), which is substantially down from 38 percent/50 percent in the March Hotline poll.

2. Bush's approval ratings are also all down from March. Overall, he is at 46 percent approval/51 percent disapproval (42/54 among independents), down from 52/46 last month. His economic approval rating is 39/56 (36/60 among independents), down from 43/54 last month. His rating on Iraq is now 41/54 and his rating on Social Security has actually dipped below 30 percent (29/58).

And when asked specifically about the job Bush has done in the first 100 days of his second term, just 38 percent say excellent or good, while 58 percent say only fair or poor (30/69 among independents).

3. Has Bush been a uniter or divider? Voters know what they think about this one. By 53-33, they say he's been a divider not a uniter.

4. On Social Security, besides his abysmal approval rating on the issue, the poll finds that "given President Bush's position on Social Security", if the presidential election were held today, 54 percent of voters say they not be likely to vote for Bush, compared to 41 percent who say they would be likely to vote for him. Too bad for the Democrats that Bush didn't push his privatization plan for Social Security *before* the election.

5. On Iraq, by 69-24, voters think it's important for the Bush administration to have a clear plan for withdrawing US troops from Iraq and, by 59-29, they think the Bush administration doesn't have one.

6. On governance issues, the Democratic party beats either Bush or the Republican party on who "governs with the interests of individual Americans in mind", "will restore the country's reputation globally" and "will adopt more progressive solutions to national issues". But both the Republican party and Bush beat the Democrats on "governs with the interests of businesses and corporations in mind".

Sounds about right.

In addition, by 55-29 (61-22 among independents), voters say Democrats should "provide a balance" to make sure Bush and the Republicans don't go too far with their agenda, rather than "work in a bipartisan way" with Republicans to help pass Bush's legislative priorities and avoid gridlock.

Finally, by 48-30, voters disapprove of taking away the Senate filibuster and approve, 48-35, of Democrats responding to a takeaway of the filibuster by a drastic slowdown in conducting Senate business.

The second poll that's full of bad news for Bush is [the new Wall Street Journal/NBC News poll](#). Among the poll's main findings:

1. On the standard right direction/wrong track question, the poll finds only 34 percent saying

right direction and 51 percent saying wrong track. That's the worst reading in this poll for Bush's entire administration, with the lone exception of last May.

2. Bush's overall approval rating is 48 percent approve/46 percent disapprove, his worst showing since his reelection last November. His economic approval rating is now 41 percent/53 percent, down from 46 percent/50 percent in February and tied with last May for the worst rating of his administration. And his foreign policy rating is now 42 percent/50 percent, the absolute worst showing of his administration.

3. On governance issues, by 63 percent to 30 percent, the public says Democrats in Congress should provide a balance so that Republicans don't go too far, rather than work in a bipartisan way to pass Bush's legislative priorities. By 50 percent to 40 percent, the public says that the Senate should maintain, not eliminate the filibuster. And, by 54 percent to 35 percent, the public says that the federal government should be less active, not more active, on social and moral issues facing the country.

4. On tax cuts, 54 percent now say that federal tax cuts have *not* been worth it, because they have increased the deficit and caused cuts in government programs, compared to just 38 percent who say the tax cuts have been worth it, because they strengthened the economy and allowed Americans to keep more of their own money.

5. On Social Security, the public now thinks, by 55 percent to 35 percent, that it's "a bad idea to change the Social Security system to allow workers to invest their Social Security contributions in the stock market," the most negative sounding yet in this poll. And, as before, those who think it's a bad idea are mostly not open to changing their minds on this issue, while those who think it's a good idea are open to changing their mind by more than two to one.

In addition, the poll asked:

Please tell me which of the following approaches to dealing with Social Security you would prefer—(A) making some adjustments but leaving the Social Security system basically as is and running the risk that the system will fall short of money as more people retire and become eligible for benefits, OR (B) changing the Social Security system by allowing people to invest some of their Social Security taxes in private accounts—like I-R-A's or 401k's—and running the risk that some people will lose money in their private accounts due to drops in the stock market?

and found a 48 percent to 40 percent plurality in favor of leaving the Social Security system basically as is.

6. The poll also found that Bush's policies are starting to split the Republican base. As [John Harwood's article in the \*Wall Street Journal\*](#) put it:

Almost three months into President Bush's second term, a raft of economic and social issues—Social Security, immigration, gay marriage and the recent national debate over Terri Schiavo—is splintering the Republican base.

After winning re-election on the strength of support from nine in 10 Republican voters, the president is seeing significant chunks of that base balk at major initiatives, a new *Wall Street Journal*/NBC News poll shows. One-third of Republicans say Democrats in Congress should prevent Mr. Bush and party leaders from “going too far in pushing their agenda,” and 41% oppose eliminating filibusters against Mr. Bush’s judicial nominees—the “nuclear option” that Senate Republican leaders are considering.

The Schiavo case has opened another rift. Though Mr. Bush and Republican congressional leaders acted to maximize the opportunity for reinserting Ms. Schiavo’s feeding tube, 39% of Republicans said removing the tube was “the right thing to do,” while 48% said it was wrong. About 18% of Republicans say they lost respect for Mr. Bush on the issue and 41% lost respect for Congress. . . .

On his centerpiece initiative of Social Security, for instance, 32% of Republicans call it “a bad idea” to let workers invest payroll taxes in the stock markets.

Despite Mr. Bush’s cross-country tour to sell his plan, that proportion has held steady since January, while resistance among Democrats and senior citizens has driven overall opposition to 55% from the 50% recorded on the eve of his second inauguration. . . . On judicial nominations—a cause of contention between the White House and Democratic leaders—resistance among rank-and-file Republicans is even higher. Four in 10 say the option of filibusters should be preserved.

On Mr. Bush’s proposal to grant legal status to some illegal immigrants already in the U.S., Republicans are opposed by 50%-48%—almost matching the 54%-42% opposition among Democrats. About 55% of independents oppose Mr. Bush’s plan, while 38% favor it.

Nearly two-thirds of Republicans say Congress shouldn’t pass legislation affecting families in cases such as Ms. Schiavo’s, though some Republicans on Capitol Hill aim to do just that. By 50%-37%, Republicans say the federal government should be “less active” on social and moral issues; on gay marriage Republicans split evenly, with 48% saying Congress should pass legislation and 47% saying it shouldn’t.

The third bad news poll for Bush is [the latest Ipsos/AP poll](#). In that poll, right direction/wrong track is at a very unimpressive 38 percent/56 percent, Bush’s overall approval rating is down to 44 percent approve/54 percent disapprove, his worst ever in the poll, and his economic approval rating is down to 42 percent/54 percent, also his worst ever.

His other approval ratings in the poll are equally unimpressive. His rating on Social Security is 36 percent/58 percent (his worst ever), his rating on handling domestic issues is 38 percent/58 percent (also his worst ever), his rating on Iraq is 43 percent/56 percent and even his rating on “foreign policy issues and the war on terrorism” is now below 50 percent (at 49 percent/49 percent).

Not so good! Bush is now confronted with a country where Democrats hate him, independents are severely critical and even Republicans are starting to split over many of his policies. Sounds

like an opening for the Democrats.

We shall see if they are able to make good use of this opportunity.

## **Can You Say “Dead”? I Think You Can!**

**The April 1–2 Gallup poll** puts another nail in the coffin of Bush’s Social Security privatization effort.

Gallup asked about Bush’s plan in two different ways. Here’s the good idea/bad idea version:

As you may know, one idea to address concerns with the Social Security system would allow people who retire in future decades to invest some of their Social Security taxes in the stock market and bonds, but would reduce the guaranteed benefits they get when they retire. Do you think this is a good idea or a bad idea?

The public’s verdict: 61 percent bad idea/33 percent good idea, which is even more negative than the last time this question was asked on March 18–20 when it was 59 bad/33 good.

And here’s the favor proposal/oppose proposal version:

As you may know, a proposal has been made that would allow workers to invest part of their Social Security taxes in the stock market or in bonds, while the rest of those taxes would remain in the Social Security system. Do you favor or oppose this proposal?

This also receives a very negative response: 56 percent opposed/39 percent in favor. Note that this is quite a bit more negative than the previous time (March 18–20) Gallup asked this question when the verdict was close to split (45 favor/47 oppose).

The shift on the second version of the question and the convergence in negativity between the two versions of the question suggest that the public is becoming less sensitive to question wording when asked about Bush’s proposal. They’ve made up their minds what they think about his proposal (they flat out don’t like it) and any reasonable question wording is going to elicit that strongly negative verdict.

So where does that leave us? **Let me turn things over to Max Baucus**, Democratic Senator from Montana, who Bush once fantasized might be a Democratic vote for privatization:

Frankly, my personal view [is], privatization is dead. It’s not going to be enacted. It’s not going to be enacted because it is so flawed and it is so wrong, and the American people sense that, they feel it, they know it.

I think the good Senator is onto something.

The rest of this Gallup poll is full of yet more bad tidings for Bush, **reflecting the way things have generally been going for him lately**. His overall approval rating is 48 percent, with 48 percent disapproval, his second worst approval rating since the election (after the previous

Gallup poll's 45 percent). His approval rating on the economy is now 41 percent approval/55 percent disapproval, down substantially from 48 percent/49 percent in late February. His ratings on Iraq (43 percent/54 percent) and terrorism (57 percent/40 percent) are also down from their late February measurements, though less than the economic rating.

Speaking of Iraq, this poll finds a 53 percent to 45 percent majority saying it was *not* worth going to war in Iraq. Even more significant, for the first time a majority (50 percent to 48 percent) says the Bush administration deliberately misled the public about whether Iraq had WMD.

Bringing up the rear on Bush's approval ratings are, unsurprisingly, Bush's ratings on Social Security (now 35 percent/57 percent) and on handling the Terri Schiavo case (34 percent/53 percent).

And speaking of the Schiavo case, it now seems clear some serious damage has been to the GOP's image by the intrusive and ideological way they handled it. As [a USA Today story on the poll](#) points out:

By 55%-40%, respondents say Republicans, traditionally the party of limited government, are "trying to use the federal government to interfere with the private lives of most Americans" on moral values.

By 53%-40%, they say Democrats, who sharply expanded government since the Depression, aren't trying to interfere on moral issues. . . .

By more than 2-to-1, 39%-18%, Americans say the "religious right" has too much influence in the Bush administration. That's a change from when the question was asked in CBS News/*New York Times* polls taken from 2001 to 2003. Then, approximately equal numbers said conservative Christians had too much and too little influence.

Final note: all this bad news, including the veritable death-knell for Bush's privatization plan, comes courtesy of a Gallup sample that, [as Steve Soto points out](#), is +4 Republican on party identification, a distribution inconsistent with almost all other recent polls, which have been showing a Democratic edge. So perhaps these results, bad as they are for Bush, may actually be understating his difficulties a bit.

## Higher Gas Prices Hit Middle Class

As I have repeatedly noted, Bush's approval rating on the economy has been slipping lately and [the April 1-2 Gallup poll](#) (see above) has more evidence on one key reason for that: higher gas prices are hitting the middle class and they don't like it.

According to the poll:

Almost 6 in 10 say the higher prices are causing a hardship, including 15% who say the

hardship is “serious.” More than a third of Americans have cut back on spending because of the higher prices, and about half have cut back significantly on the amount of driving they do. Lower-income Americans feel especially hard hit.

The poll, conducted April 1–2, finds that 58% of Americans have experienced hardship, the first time in the past six years that a majority has expressed this view.

Overall, 48 percent of the public has cut back on driving, due to higher gas prices, and 38 percent have cut back on household spending. By income group, these figures are 71 percent cut back on driving/68 percent cut back on household spending among those with less than \$20,000 in household income, 54 percent/52 percent among those with \$20,000–\$30,000 income, 55 percent/40 percent among those with \$30,000–\$50,000 and 42 percent/29 percent among those with \$50,000–\$75,000. So the pinch from higher gas prices is now being felt at income levels well into the middle class. That’s a change and not a welcome one for those in the Bush administration.

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***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:

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