

# THE CENTURY FOUNDATION

## public opinion watch

by ruy teixeira

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(Covering polls and related articles from the week of *April 11–17, 2005*.)

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## **What Do American Voters Really Think About National Security and Foreign Policy Issues?**

While much survey data has been gathered in the months since the election on Americans' attitudes towards specific foreign policy events (e.g., the election in Iraq) or controversies (should the United States take action against Iran?), these data are scattered among numerous public polls, each of which typically has only a short series of questions on foreign policy or national security issues. It has therefore been difficult to get a comprehensive picture of where Americans' views currently stand on these issues, since one has only uncoordinated bits and pieces of data to work with.

The newly launched **Security and Peace Institute** (a joint project of **The Century Foundation** and the **Center for American Progress**) has provided a useful corrective to this situation by releasing **a survey conducted for them by the Marttila Communications Group**, with **an extensive accompanying report**. This lengthy survey has a large sample size (1600 voters) which was split-sampled through most of the survey so that an exceptionally wide range of questions and alternative wordings could be tested.

The survey's key findings (summarized below) indicate that, while Republicans retain a

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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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substantial lead as the party best able to deal with national security issues, voters' broad foreign policy and security goals should provide a very significant opening for Democrats in the years ahead.

1. The two main international concerns of the American people are preventing the spread of nuclear weapons, particularly to terrorists or hostile regimes, and the destruction of the al Qaeda terrorist network.
2. President Bush receives mixed ratings for his overall performance conducting the War on Terror. Americans are generally supportive of his efforts to dismantle Osama bin Laden's terrorist network and express confidence in the administration's ability to protect the United States from future terrorist attacks.
3. Americans reject the strategy of preemption. They overwhelmingly prefer cooperation with other countries, even if it involves short-term compromises of U.S. national interests.
4. Americans remain divided about the Iraq war. While narrow pluralities believe the war was a mistake, was not worth the costs, and has made them less safe from terrorism, a narrow majority hold that removing Saddam Hussein was necessary to win the fight against terror. Nonetheless, Americans believe that bringing U.S. troops home is a far higher priority than building a stable and democratic Iraq.
5. As a result of the Iraq war, a majority of Americans are now more reluctant to support the use of U.S. troops. However, there are several specific circumstances under which a majority do support the U.S. use of troops, including disrupting an attack planned by a foreign country or terrorists, to support NATO or UN peacekeeping, and to halt genocide.
6. Large majorities of Americans believe that America's international reputation has deteriorated since President Bush took office. Most believe that the absence of weapons of mass destruction in Iraq badly eroded U.S. credibility and that this loss of status is a serious concern.
7. Voters strongly support U.S. action to protect human rights abroad, prevent genocide, and check the spread of AIDS. They generally agree that the United States has a moral role to play in world affairs.
8. Solid majorities of Americans believe that the United States should be active in world affairs and continue to play an active role in the UN.
9. Americans have a clear perspective about which countries pose the greatest threat to U.S. national security and to world peace—North Korea, Iraq, and Iran. China also draws some concern. They consider the Middle East and Far East the most important regions for U.S. strategic interests.
10. Americans consider spreading democracy a marginal U.S. priority, even in Afghanistan

and Iraq, where the United States has been militarily engaged.

11. In spite of the war on terror, large majorities of Americans believe that a clash of civilizations between the United States and Islam is not inevitable, that future U.S. military conflict with Islamic nations is avoidable, and that Muslims in America and around the world do not support al Qaeda, Osama bin Laden, or the practice of terrorism.
12. Republicans enjoy significantly higher ratings on the key issue of national security; Democrats are seen as better able to repair America's relations abroad.

Underscoring the potential for Democrats and progressives, data in the survey and report indicate that independent voters tend to be particularly critical of the Bush administration and especially interested in alternative approaches to American foreign policy. For example, while Bush has a narrowly positive approval rating on handling the war on terror (51 percent/46 percent) among all voters, he has a net negative rating (47 percent/48 percent) among independents. And, while voters overall believe, by nineteen points (59 percent/40 percent), that the Bush administration has been successful in dismantling Bin Laden's terror network, among independents that margin falls to just five points (52 percent/47 percent).

In terms of general approaches to foreign policy, voters overall oppose the preemption strategy by 58 percent to 34 percent, a margin that widens to 64 percent to 30 percent among independents. Similarly, voters as a whole believe, by 63 percent to 31 percent, that the United States should cooperate with other countries as often as we can, even if that means we have to compromise our interests on occasion, but among independents it's an even more lop-sided 70 percent to 26 percent majority. And, by 56 percent to 38 percent, voters overall say that America's long-term interest is to remain loose to traditional European allies, even at the cost of compromise, with independents providing almost two-to-one support (63 percent to 32 percent) for this proposition.

Independents are also more likely to believe that the United States made a mistake in sending troops to Iraq (59 percent to 39 percent, compared to 52 percent to 46 percent overall) and that the war with Iraq has not been worth the costs (56 percent to 40 percent, compared to 50 percent to 46 percent overall).

In short, these survey data give every reason to suppose Democrats and progressives can compete effectively with Bush and the GOP on the terrain of foreign policy and national security. It would be an act of political malpractice to ignore this opportunity and cede these areas to the GOP.

## The Jewish Vote in 2004

According to the 2004 National Election Pool (NEP) exit poll, Bush captured 25 percent of the Jewish vote in last November's election, compared to 74 percent for Kerry. That appeared to be a substantial improvement over Bush's performance in 2000, when the Voter News Service (VNS) exit poll credited him with only 19 percent of the Jewish vote, compared to 79 percent for Gore.

A new report, "[The Jewish Vote in 2004: An Analysis](#)," by The Solomon Project suggests that Bush made considerably less progress with the Jewish vote than the figures quoted above indicate. The report points out that:

The National Election Pool (NEP) commissioned Edison/Mitofsky to conduct the 2004 exit poll. They interviewed 77,006 voters as they walked out of a polling station or (if the voter mailed his/her ballot) over the telephone. Almost 14,000 of these voters (268 of whom were Jewish) were part of the NEP's "national survey;" the other voters were given a state-specific questionnaire. Most of the respondents were asked their religion, and 2% (weighted, 3%) indicated that they were Jewish, for a total of 1,511 Jewish respondents.

Due to the small size of the Jewish population compared to the rest of the electorate, NEP had difficulty achieving a correct distribution of Jewish voters throughout the nation. In the "national survey" alone, the Jewish respondents hail from only 21 of the 51 states (including the District of Columbia). As an example of disproportionate representation, Florida Jews made up 16% of this weighted sample, whereas the American Jewish Committee reported that 11% of American Jews live in the Sunshine State. New Jersey Jews, who constituted 4% of the national survey, are underrepresented compared to AJC's estimate that 8% of American Jews reside in New Jersey.

If you use all of the Jewish respondents to the exit polls, not just those given the national questionnaire, and weight the respondents by their state's contribution to the national vote (as has been done with the Hispanic vote to produce a more reliable estimate of that group's 2004 vote), you get a different figure for the Jewish vote in 2004: 77 percent Kerry, 22 percent Bush.

That's a substantially less impressive improvement over Bush's performance in 2000. As the report notes:

When viewing only the two major parties, the two-party American Jewish vote was Kerry 78%, Bush 22%. Between 1996 and 2004, the Democratic two-party Jewish vote as compared to the national vote has been remarkably stable—28% more Democratic than the national average in 1996, 30% more Democratic in 2000, and 29% more Democratic in 2004.

The report cites a host of other data reinforcing the conclusion that Bush's and the GOP's progress among Jewish voters has—at least nationally—been negligible (some state data, like Florida's, indicated larger gains for Bush in 2004, but the small Jewish sample sizes in the NEP

state surveys, especially in Florida, make it difficult to have a lot of confidence that these gains were real). I recommend the report to all those interested in separating fact from fiction about the contemporary Jewish vote in American politics.

## **Bush's Seventeenth-Quarter Approval Ratings Lag Far Behind His Predecessors**

**A new Gallup report** finds that Bush averaged 50.7 percent approval (just 43 percent among independents) in the seventeenth quarter of his presidency (January 20–April 19, 2005). That compares quite poorly with his predecessors. The report notes:

Most other presidents were well above the 50% job approval mark at similar points in their presidencies: Dwight Eisenhower at 69.0%, Richard Nixon at 60.8%, Ronald Reagan at 58.0%, and Bill Clinton at 57.5%. The lone exception was Lyndon Johnson, who—unlike the other presidents—was not beginning his second term during the 17th quarter of his presidency, but rather, nearing the end of it. An average of 44.3% of Americans approved of Johnson at that time. In Johnson's first full quarter after being re-elected (January to April 1965)—similar to where Bush and the other presidents were in their 17th quarters—he averaged 68.4% job approval.

The report concludes:

Absent some dramatic international or domestic event that could produce a rally in support, Bush's approval ratings are unlikely to improve substantially in the near term. In the long term, the state of the economy and Bush's ability to handle pressing issues such as Social Security, Iraq, and energy costs will help determine whether Bush can break out of the low 50% approval range, or whether he will slip below that level.

In light of what has been happening lately, especially on the economy, slipping below that 50 percent level seems like a very real possibility.

On Monday, for example, the *New York Times* had a front page story on "**Sudden Bearish Sentiment Underlines Fears on Economy**," detailing the sudden and serious investor jitters about the economy.

Also on Monday, Paul Krugman pointed to the unmistakable **signs of stagflation** that are now afflicting the economy.

Last week, several papers, including the *New York Times*, pointed out that **real wages in the last year have declined**, reversing the steady progress in living standards that had started under Bill Clinton in the mid-1990s.

And below I summarize the latest evidence concerning declining consumer confidence and rising consumer credit worries.

Maybe Bush better savor that 50.7 percent average while he's got it!

## One More Economic Problem: Consumer Credit Worries

A new Gallup report highlights another reason why there is such dissatisfaction with the economy and why Bush's economic approval ratings are in the tank. According to the report, **"Consumer Credit Worries Suggest Spending Decline"**:

Right now, Gallup's economic data suggest that a collapse of consumer spending is a much higher probability than many economists within and outside of the Fed seem willing to acknowledge.

Consumers' optimism about their personal credit situations fell sharply in April, declining 18 points to 82 from the baseline of 100 established in March. The decline was most pronounced in the Future Situation Index, which declined 13 points—from 59 to 46. Compared to March, consumers showed less confidence in their ability to continue to make their monthly payments, less optimism that they will be able to borrow in the future if they need to do so, and a reduced likelihood that they will be able to pay down their debt.

Consumers' assessments of their current credit situations also declined, as the Present Situation Index declined by 5 points—from 41 in March to 36 in April.

Consumer economic expectations also remain highly negative:

According to a new Gallup Poll, conducted April 4–7, only 35% of consumers say current economic conditions in the country as a whole are "getting better," compared with 56% who say they are "getting worse." This difference of –21 percentage points is nearly as large as the –26 points recorded at the end of March. More importantly, it is twice the difference of –9 percentage points recorded in Gallup's March 7–10 poll, in which 41% said economic conditions were getting better and 50% said they were getting worse. Gallup's late March and early April poll results show that consumer expectations about the economy's future direction are the most negative they have been since the Iraq war began, in March 2003.

The Gallup report sums up the bleak outlook among the public as follows:

Gallup's attitudinal economic measures show consumer confidence tumbling as consumers have experienced record prices at the gas pump, increasing interest rates, stagnant wages, and slower-than-expected job growth. Investor optimism has also declined recently. And now, it appears consumers are becoming much less positive about their personal credit situations.

To this point, consumers have continued to spend even as their overall confidence in the economy's direction has declined. They have been able to do this in part by adding to their debt. In this context, consumers' growing concerns about their ability to make their future monthly payments, and borrow if the need arises, create a new threat to consumer spending. If consumers decide to slow their credit use, consumer spending

on items other than food and energy may decline significantly in the months ahead.

Recently, a number of major retailers reported lower profits and slower-than-expected sales in March. One of their explanations to Wall Street was to blame their troubles on bad weather. In sharp contrast, Gallup's economic data suggest that the real cause may be a major decline in consumers' perceptions of their own personal credit situations.

No wonder Bush is getting such lousy economic approval ratings! The typical American consumer is very worried indeed about their economic situation and Bush's cheerful talk about an economy that's "strong and getting stronger" is sounding more and more out of touch with the reality of their lives.

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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: [www.tcf.org](http://www.tcf.org).