

# THE CENTURY FOUNDATION

## public opinion watch

by ruy teixeira

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(Covering polls and related articles from the weeks of July 25–August 21, 2005)

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### **Bush's First Sub-40 Approval Rating**

In late June, [I remarked](#):

If present trends continue, it will not be long before Bush receives his first sub-40 overall approval rating, a traditional marker of an incumbent administration in serious trouble.

Well, it's here. In [the latest American Research Group \(ARG\) poll](#), Bush's overall approval rating is down to 36 percent, with 58 percent disapproval. This result is importantly driven by Bush's relatively low rating among Republican identifiers (77 percent). [As I also observed](#) in late June:

Bush's approval rating among Republicans has fallen in recent months from around 90 percent to around 85 percent. It is entirely possible it will decline further if the difficulties of the Bush administration continue to deepen. Certainly, there is no sound reason to suppose Republican identifiers will somehow be immune from overall political trends.

Bush's 77 percent rating among Republicans suggests that attrition in Bush's approval rating among this group is indeed continuing. If so, we are likely to observe more sub-40 Bush approval ratings in the near future. Already, other public polls have come very close to breaking

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this barrier. The latest [Ipsos-Associated Press](#) and [Newsweek](#) polls have Bush's rating at 42 percent and the latest [Quinnipiac](#) and [Survey USA fifty state](#) polls have his rating down to 41 percent.

The reasons for Bush's current low ratings are not hard to discern. First and foremost is probably Iraq and its increasingly vexed relationship to the war on terror. In the *Newsweek* poll, Bush's approval rating on Iraq is down to a shockingly low 34 percent, with 61 percent disapproval. Half the public now thinks we are losing ground rather than making progress (40 percent) in our efforts to establish security and democracy in Iraq. *And a staggering 64 percent now believe the Iraq war has not made Americans safer from terrorism, compared to just 28 percent who believe it has.*

No doubt related to the harsh judgements that the public is forming on the Iraq war, views on Bush's character—his other strong suit along with his stewardship of the war on terror—continue to erode. In the Ipsos-Associated Press poll, more now say he is dishonest (50 percent) than say he's honest (48 percent). And a clear majority (56 percent) now say he can be described as arrogant. Dishonest and arrogant. Not exactly the characteristics Americans are typically looking for in a president.

And let's not forget the economy. In the ARG poll, Bush's approval rating on the economy is down to 33 percent, with 61 percent disapproval—the worst I've seen in this or any other public poll. Apparently, the public gives little credit to Bush for recent improvements that have shown up in some aggregate economic statistics, but assign him considerable blame for rising gas prices and health care costs, a poor job situation, sluggish to nonexistent wage growth and a generalized sense of economic insecurity.

As [the most recent Gallup report on public views of the economy](#) puts it:

Americans, on average, continue to believe that economic conditions in the United States are getting worse, not better. Only a little more than a third are willing to rate the economy as "excellent" or "good." A majority says it is a bad time to find a quality job. And about a third of Americans tell us that some aspect of the economy is the most important problem facing the country today.

In none of these instances are there signs of a sustained recovery in consumer confidence. In most cases, the public's views on the economy remain more depressed than they were at the beginning of this year or on average last year.

All this on top of Bush's debacle on Social Security, where the public soundly rejected his privatization plan and now gives him approval ratings in this area that just barely break 30 percent in most polls.

This can reasonably be described as a target-rich environment for the Democrats as we move into 2006. As [the latest Democracy Corps memo](#) summarizes the situation:

There is every reason to believe America is ready for a change election in 2006—already evident in the Democrats' remarkable performance this past Tuesday in

the contest for Ohio-2, one of the most Republican congressional seats in the country. Voters were diverted from voting for change in 2004, but the sentiment now is much stronger, with only 41 percent consistently saying they want to continue in Bush's direction. Only 37 percent of all voters think the country is headed in the right direction, falling to 29 percent among independents.

But the memo also notes:

[The Democrats'] own image has not improved and most of the gain in Congressional vote margin has come from the Republicans' decline. That has created a lot of dislodged voters not yet enamored with the Democrats and a lot of protest and change voters that the Democrats can still pick up. Democrats are still at 48 percent but need to push over 50 percent. Fortunately, over one in ten voters are "winnable" for the Democrats—ready to switch their vote and hostile to the Republicans, but not yet voting Democratic.

The memo goes on to detail the groups where the Democrats appear to have already made considerable progress (white rural voters, white mainline Protestants, and white postgraduates) and those groups where winnable voters for the Democrats are most common (white older noncollege voters, midwestern voters, unmarried women, white seniors, and devout white Catholics). This analysis can be fruitfully read in conjunction with another Democracy Corps memo on "[The Cultural Divide and the Challenge of Winning Back Rural and Red State Voters](#)," which summarizes the results of focus groups held among rural voters in Wisconsin and Arkansas and disaffected Bush voters in Kentucky and Colorado. These results help bring into focus the difficulties Democrats face winning over voters who don't like where the country is going, but aren't yet sold on the Democrats as an alternative. Here are some key observations from the focus group memo:

[P]articipants' broad dissatisfaction with the country's direction was focused on three issues—the lack of progress or a clear plan in Iraq, a stagnant economy without job security, and skyrocketing health care costs. President Bush and Republicans in Congress were faulted for their lack of effective leadership on these issues and their failure to offer new ideas. . . .

There is no doubt that congressional Democrats start at a disadvantage, with red state and rural voters holding very negative views of the party on a number of fronts—most notably support for big government at the expense of personal responsibility, "moral issues," and security—but the real problem for Democrats is that their elected officials, and by extension their entire party, are perceived as directionless and divided, standing for nothing other than their own personal enrichment. . . .

Democrats are seen as being more on the side of the middle class and working Americans, more in touch with the challenges facing these Americans. However, voters only see this manifested in costly government social programs or political alliances with labor unions and minorities. There is absolutely no sense that Democrats have a viable alternative vision that would truly promote broad economic growth or increased prosperity for working Americans. . . .

The unity Democrats showed in opposing President Bush's Social Security privatization plans was an important first step for a party seen as weak and standing for nothing, although it also served to reinforce the belief among many red state and rural voters that Democrats are quick to oppose Republican initiatives but have no positive agenda of their own.

*Quit criticizing so much and have a little bit more of your own direction. Whether it's right or wrong, pick a direction and go. . . . Be on the offense instead of the defense.*  
(Appleton, older non-college men)

*The Democrats have opposed these efforts. . . . Well, where is their great idea for protecting jobs? Where is their great idea for lowering health costs? They don't have it.*  
(Appleton, younger non-college women)

*They want to point out the issues that go wrong that the Republicans are making. And yet, they don't really have a solution of their own. . . . That's why they don't ever win now.* (Little Rock, older non-college women)

The message of these and other findings is straightforward: Democrats can't overcome a cultural divide that advantages the Republicans among contested voters unless those voters have a clear sense of what Democrats stand for. Given that they don't, it's no wonder voters as a whole give Democrats only trivial advantages on the economy generally and in key areas like creating economic security and providing opportunity. Moreover, the image of the party continues to lag the Republicans on critical attributes like optimism, prosperity and individuals making the most of their talents.

And, on the key issue of Iraq, Democrats are famously divided on what to call for, despite the public's increased discontent about the war and increased interest in a timetable for withdrawal. The failure of Democrats to coalesce around a specific plan and timetable for withdrawal seems likely to limit their potential gains from this issue, as well as reinforce their basic problem of appearing to not know what they stand for.

### **More Hispanics, More Democratic**

As two recent reports document, the Hispanic population of the United States continues to increase rapidly, especially in areas that we now think of as "solid red." **The Pew Hispanic Center report** describes and analyzes the extraordinary growth of the Hispanic population in six southern states, Arkansas, Alabama, Georgia, North Carolina, South Carolina, and Tennessee, down to the county level. **The Census report** shows that Texas has now become a majority-minority state (joining New Mexico, California and Hawaii), primarily due to its burgeoning Hispanic population.

The political impact of this demographic trend should generally favor the Democrats. But the extent to which this is true will be limited if Democratic margins among Hispanics continue to be shaved, as they were in the 2004 election.

However, according to a useful new report by the indefatigable folks at Democracy Corps, the Democratic margin among Hispanics seems likely to expand in the future, not contract. If so, the pro-Democratic impact of Hispanic population growth should be very substantial. The Democracy Corps report is based on a June survey of Hispanic voters, **whose basic results I previously summarized**. There is much rich detail in this report, but here are some of the most important observations:

Democrats witnessed the loss of a small though significant portion of their Hispanic support to George Bush in 2000 and 2004, but by no means were these dislodged voters an advance party for a greater flight of Hispanics from the Democratic Party. Hispanic voters remain instinctively very Democratic, but more important than that, they hold values, views of society, the economy and the role of government, as well as issue priorities and hopes for America, that put them deep inside the Democratic world. *The Democrats will stem the erosion of the Hispanic vote, not by chasing the defectors or waving the partisan banner, but by rediscovering their own values and beliefs.* The route to a national Democratic majority goes right through the Hispanic community, where Democrats will find the themes that best define the modern Democratic Party. . . .

[Hispanic] voters were disappointed and dislodged; they did not defect. In this survey just completed, Hispanics had swung back to the Democrats with a vengeance, giving them a 32-point margin in a generic race for Congress (61 to 29 percent). The Republican vote today is 10 points below what Bush achieved just six months earlier. These voters are deeply dissatisfied with the Bush economy and Iraq war; they are socially tolerant and internationalist; they align with a Democratic Party that respects Hispanics and diversity, that uses government to help families, reduce poverty and create opportunity, and that will bring major change in education and health care. This is even truer for the growing younger population under 30, including Gen Y voters, who support the Democrats by a remarkable 46 points (70 to 24 percent). All together, this paints a portrait of a group that respects Bill Clinton, indeed giving him higher marks than the Catholic Church, and that embraces his vision of the Democratic Party. . . .

When Hispanic voters were asked why Kerry lost, they focused above all on Kerry himself, *his lack of clear convictions*, followed by worries about his positions on abortion and gay marriage. . . .

That values issues were part of the erosion in 2004 and 2000 is not the same as saying that addressing those issues directly is the best way to rebuild the Democrats' majority. Majorities of Hispanics believe we should be tolerant of homosexuality, would keep abortion legal, and support stem cell research, even with church opposition. This is especially true among the large younger and more middle-class segments of the community. . . .

[Hispanics'] views on values, family, the economy, the poor, working people and the middle class, community and government, and how best to expand opportunity and realize the American dream put these voters in the center of a Democratic world—if *the Democrats would remember what it means to be a Democrat in these times.* (emphases

added)

Do I detect a theme here? Just as Democrats—as we saw above—will do best among difficult, contestable voter groups by making clear what they stand for, they will maximize their potential gains among Democratic-leaning Hispanics by doing the very same thing. Sounds like a winner to me.

### **Weighting by Party Identification: Why to Do It and How to Do It**

**Alan Abramowitz** has waded, once again, into the party-weighting controversy with an excellent intervention, “**Just Weight!: The Case for Dynamic Party Identification Weighting**,” published in the **Cook Political Report**. In the article, Abramowitz looks at 2005 Gallup poll data (be sure to check out the charts in his article) and finds the following:

Between January 1 and August 7, 2005, the Gallup Poll conducted 24 separate national surveys in which respondents were questioned about their party identification. . . .

Across all 24 polls, there was an average Democratic advantage of 3 percentage points. This was identical to the average for all Gallup Polls conducted during 2004, indicating that there has been little or no change in the underlying party loyalties of the American electorate. Among these 24 polls, however, the party identification differential ranged from an 11 point Republican advantage on February 4–6 to a 14 point Democratic advantage on June 29–30, a 25 point swing. In some cases, moreover, there were dramatic shifts within just a few days. Between February 4–6 and February 7–10, an 11 point Republican advantage became a 6 point Democratic advantage. Similarly, between March 18–20 and March 21–23, a 5 point Republican advantage became an 8 point Democratic advantage.

Hardly believable, eh? And here’s why it matters:

Because party identification is strongly related to political attitudes such as presidential approval, large swings in the proportions of Democrats and Republicans between surveys can produce large swings in estimates of these other attitudes. For example, between February 4–6 and February 7–10 there was a swing from an 11 point Republican advantage to a 6 point Democratic advantage in party identification. At the same time, President Bush’s approval rating fell from 57 percent to 49 percent. Similarly, between March 18–20 and March 21–23, there was a swing from a 5 point Republican advantage to an 8 point Democratic advantage in party identification and President Bush’s approval rating fell from 52 percent to 45 percent. Rather than reflecting any real change in the public’s evaluation of the President’s job performance, these shifts were probably caused by random variation in the partisan composition of the Gallup sample. Such random variation becomes even more problematic before a presidential election because it can affect estimates of voting intentions which, like presidential approval, are strongly related to party identification.

But what to do about this? Is there a way to fix the problem that still allows party ID to change some over time in response to changing political conditions (as it surely does)? Indeed there is: *dynamic party identification weighting*, a solution flogged by Abramowitz, myself, Charlie Cook and others. Here's Abramowitz' description:

A potential solution to the problem of excessive variation in the partisan composition of individual samples is to estimate the underlying proportions of Democrats and Republicans in the electorate by combing the results of surveys conducted over several weeks. This estimate can then be used to weight the proportions of Democrats and Republicans in each sample. By combining several surveys, random variation due to sampling error can be greatly reduced.

[For example, with a] 10-poll moving average . . . instead of estimating the proportions of Democrats and Republicans in the electorate based on individual samples of approximately 1000 respondents, we are estimating the proportions of Democrats and Republicans based on combined samples of approximately 10,000 respondents.

[This produces results] . . . much more consistent with the findings of political science research on the nature of party identification in the American electorate: party identification is a stable orientation that changes slowly in response to changes in the political environment. Over the past several months, for a variety of reasons, that political environment has become more favorable for Democrats and it appears that between April and July of 2005 there was a modest increase in the proportion of Democratic identifiers relative to the proportion of Republican identifiers. Because extraneous noise caused by sampling error has been largely removed, this trend is much more evident [with dynamic party ID weighting]. . . . Overall, these results provide strong support for the use of dynamic party identification weighting in public opinion polling.

I agree. You may agree, too. But we don't take the polls. Gallup and the various other survey organizations do. Let 'em know what you think.

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