

# THE CENTURY FOUNDATION

## **public opinion watch**

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*(Covering polls and related articles from the week of January 24–30, 2005.)*

**In this edition of *Public Opinion Watch*:**

**Public Not With the Bush Program**

**Voters on Bush's Social Security Plan: Thanks, but No Thanks**

**Yes, Virginia, Question Wording Does Matter**

**That Cleared Up Everything, Right?**

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

### **Public Not With the Bush Program**

**[Greenberg Quinlan Rosner poll of 998 likely voters for Democracy Corps](#), released January 27, 2005 (conducted January 16–20, 2005)**

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The latest Democracy Corps poll (see also [the useful accompanying charts](#)) provides a wide range of data indicating that the public, while they may have granted Bush a second term, remains distinctly unenthusiastic about his agenda.

In terms of right direction/wrong track, just 42 percent think we're going in the right direction, compared to 51 percent who think we're off on the wrong track. And 50 percent want the country to go in a significantly different direction than Bush's direction, compared to 46 percent who want to continue in Bush's direction.

In terms of assessing the direction of the economy, only 39 percent agree that "the economy is doing well, creating jobs, rising incomes, growing stock values and home ownership and

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moving in the right direction,” while 59 percent say that “the economy is not good for the middle class and working people. Jobs are scarce, incomes stagnant, and benefits being cut back.” Two different questions on whether “the middle class dream is very much alive in America” yield negative judgments, 50 percent to 48 percent when paired against a general statement about people having less chance to be middle class and middle class living standards declining and 60 percent to 39 percent when paired against a statement that emphasized the contrast between people at the top thriving and others having less chance to be middle class.

In terms of the direction of U.S. foreign policy, 55 percent now say that “America’s security depends on building strong ties with other nations” rather than “bottom line, America’s security depends on its own military strength” (41 percent). That fourteen-point gap in favor of building strong ties is up from just a three-point gap right before November’s election. And by 55 percent to 40 percent, voters now say the war in Iraq was not worth the cost in U.S. lives and dollars—consistent with other recent polls that have been showing increasingly negative views on whether the war with Iraq has been worthwhile.

As for the focal point of Bush’s second term program—his proposal to transform Social Security by creating a system of private accounts within the system—the poll finds 44 percent to 41 percent opposition to his proposal when presented in unaided fashion (“As you may know, George Bush recently presented his proposal to reform Social Security. Overall, do you favor or oppose his proposal to reform Social Security?” And when presented in an aided fashion that includes a simple description (“As you may know, President Bush has proposed a plan to strengthen Social Security by allowing workers to establish personal accounts to invest a portion of their Social Security contributions in the stock market. Do you favor or oppose Bush’s proposal?”), opposition is even higher (52 percent to 39 percent). In addition, by 53 percent to 40 percent, people say that they are more worried about politicians changing Social Security to make it less secure in the future than about politicians *failing* to change Social Security so that it will be secure in the future.

The poll also includes an extensive battery of items that asks respondents which party they associate more with a wide variety of characteristics. The Democrats’ advantages aren’t terribly surprising. They are favored over the Republicans on: for the middle class (+21); equality (+19), a better life for middle class America (+17); cares about people (+16); putting the public interest first (+13); fairness (+11) and a number of other areas including being 24 points *less* likely to be associated with greed.

Republicans’ associational advantages are also generally predictable: strength (+27); protecting America against any threat (+25); and respecting religious faith (+15), for example. But it should give Democrats pause that the GOP’s top associational advantage is not any of these but rather “know what they stand for” (+28). The GOP also has an eleven-point advantage on optimism and a ten-point advantage on prosperity. These GOP advantages illustrate the following uncomfortable political truism for the Democrats. They will not be able to generate that much political progress from the indisputable fact that the public, in many important ways, is not with the Bush program if Democrats cannot convey to the public what they stand for and what their vision for the future is.

This point is amplified by considering some of the more contested areas, where Democrats have only slight advantages or disadvantages vis a vis the Republicans: reform and change (+5); opportunity (+3); improving America (+3); new ideas for addressing the country's problems (+3); trustworthy (+1); for families (tie); shares your values (-1); future-oriented (-1); and individuals making the most of their talents (-4). Democrats need to move many of these associations decisively in their direction and that can likely only be done by clarifying for the public what Democrats stand for and where they propose to take the country.

## **Voters on Bush's Social Security Plan: Thanks, but No Thanks**

Hart Research poll of 1,407 2004 presidential election voters for AFL-CIO, released January 26, 2005 (conducted January 6–11, 2005)

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A recently released poll of 2004 election voters by Hart Research for the AFL-CIO (no link currently available) has a host of useful data on voters' attitudes toward Social Security privatization, including some very specific tests of their views toward Bush's current plan for private accounts.

To begin with, the poll finds the public now evenly-split on whether they support (49 percent) or oppose (46 percent) the general idea of "a plan by which people who chose to could invest some of their Social Security contributions in the stock market." That's down from 64 percent to 31 percent in favor in a May, 2000 *Washington Post* poll.

The poll also, [similar to the recent Wall Street Journal/NBC poll](#), gave respondents a major troubles, but not a crisis, option in their question on whether there is crisis in the financial situation of Social Security. The result here: just 26 percent say Social Security is in a "crisis," with another 39 percent opting for a less apocalyptic major troubles assessment (another 32 percent say the system faces minor troubles or is basically secure).

The poll directly tested support for Bush's Social Security plan. Initially, before key features of the plan were rehearsed for voters, they said they opposed Bush's plan 46 percent to 39 percent. And after voters heard about the plan's key features (workers age 55 and younger can place one-third of Social Security taxes in private accounts; guaranteed monthly benefit reduced by 30 percent to 50 percent, depending on whether they open such an account; no change in benefits for those age fifty-five and over; and long-term Social Security funding shortfall eliminated, but government will have to borrow \$2 trillion to cover transition costs), opposition rose to 54 percent to 40 percent, with three times as many strong opposers (35 percent) as strong supporters (12 percent).

That opposition included 48 percent to 47 percent opposition even among those age eighteen to thirty-four (with each succeeding age group more opposed), 51 percent to 43 percent opposition among whites and 60 percent to 32 percent opposition among independents. Working class whites (arguably the group whose support is most critical to the GOP's tenuous electoral majority) were even more opposed (52 percent to 37 percent) than whites in general

and working class white women (where Bush made critical gains in 2004) opposed his plan 56 percent to 38 percent.

Moreover, twice as many said they would punish a candidate who voted for Bush's plan (41 percent) than said they would reward (21 percent) such a candidate. And by 64 percent to 20 percent, voters declared that Congress should wait and develop a different plan for Social Security, rather than pass the Bush plan this year.

Of other options to strengthen Social Security, voters expressed the most support for tax-free retirement savings options, separate from Social Security (82 percent in favor). This result is consistent with a number of other recent polls.

Other popular options were having Congress repay the money it took from the Social Security trust funds (73 percent in favor) and repealing the Bush tax cuts for the wealthiest 1 percent and giving the recovered revenue to Social Security (65 percent in favor).

The poll also tested a variety of different messages about the benefit cuts, deficit costs, and potential for corruption intrinsic to the Bush plan and found a number of them to be very effective with persuadable voters.

Hart Research summed up what they learned from this message-testing and the general results of the poll as follows:

DON'T debate this at the level of philosophy —“ownership society” vs. “social insurance.”

DO focus on the real, concrete harm to Americans' retirement security done by the Bush plan.

DON'T get caught up in debating the size of the problem.

DO focus on how Bush plan makes problem worse and weakens Social Security.

DON'T focus all your attention on “risk” of accounts.

DO tell Americans about huge benefit cuts in plan. . . .

#### *Conclusions: Focusing Our Message*

The Bush plan undermines retirement security by cutting guaranteed benefits 30% to 50%, even for those who don't choose an account. Risky privatization accounts won't make up the difference. Working people should get the benefits they paid for.

Social Security does face problems, but the Bush plan makes the problem worse and weakens Social Security by diverting trillions of dollars from the trust fund.

We can strengthen Social Security without slashing benefits:

Require Congress to pay back the money it has diverted from Social Security and create new opportunities for Americans to have tax-free savings for their retirement in addition to Social Security.

Amen.

## Yes, Virginia, Question Wording Does Matter

The Pew Research Center has just released a useful little study, “[Social Security Polling: Cross-Currents in Opinion about Private Accounts](#).” The study looks at a number of different types of questions that have been asked recently about private accounts and the president’s Social Security proposal and compares how results differ on a given type of question, depending on question wording. Here are some of the findings, which should probably come as no big surprise to those who have been reading my posts and/or closely following recent polling on the issue.

1. Polls show that the public thinks Social Security faces major problems, but does not believe it is in a “crisis.” Moreover, the public is less likely to believe Social Security system needs a complete overhaul or major change than that the health or education systems need such change.
2. Questions that do not mention the risks or tradeoffs involved in setting up private accounts generally get a more positive response than those that do.
3. Among questions that simply mention the general idea of private accounts, those that associate the idea with Bush and/or do not specify that only some of workers’ contributions could go into private accounts get the most negative response. (Note: recent Democracy Corps and Hart Research/AFL-CIO results—see above—indicate that support for the general idea, both with and without specific reference to Bush, may have declined in the short time since the questions quoted in the Pew study were asked.)
4. Among questions that do refer to the tradeoffs of private accounts, questions that allude directly to risk and, particularly, the cut in guaranteed benefits that accompany these accounts get the most negative response.
5. Finally, questions that query initial supporters of the general idea whether they would support private accounts if it meant a reduction in guaranteed benefits yield the most negative results of all: a hardcore of support for private accounts in the 22 percent to 23 percent range.

There you have it. These varying results suggest that private accounts will not have an easy time of it unless the public forgets that Bush is pushing the accounts and never connects these accounts to risk and a reduction in guaranteed benefits. Such a know-nothing public no longer seems likely on this hotly debated issue

## That Cleared Up Everything, Right?

Edison/Mitofsky released [their massively-detailed evaluation of the 2004 National Election Pool exit poll](#) last week. As Mark Blumental of Mystery Pollster observes, [there is much useful data in the report](#), even if much of it is presented in a fairly arcane fashion.

Among other things, we learn the following:

1. There was, in fact, more error in this exit poll than in previous exit polls and data are presented on WPE (within-precinct error) that pretty much clinch the case. The increased level of error meant that, after the exit poll data were initially processed and corrected, they had to be further weighted, to a greater degree than in previous exit polls, to correspond to the actual election outcome. Hence the Kerry 51 percent to 48 percent popular vote win in the initial exit poll data that became a 51 percent to 48 percent popular vote defeat upon final weighting.
2. There seem to have been serious problems with inexperienced and poorly trained interviewers, who were not able to administer the questionnaires in the fashion intended by Edison/Mitofsky.
3. There seem to have been serious sampling problems (“clustering effects”) with the national exit poll that, for example, contributed to the 44 percent support figure for Bush among Hispanic respondents, which Edison/Mitofsky appears to be backing away from.

The problem with all these admissions and the copious data in the Edison/Mitofsky report is that nowhere do they really make much of a stab at answering the underlying questions that are raised by the report’s findings.

1. If there was higher error than normal, why was that? What makes this election different and will the next election be even more different? If Kerry voters were more willing to be interviewed (or Bush voters less willing), which appears to be Edison/Mitofsky’s primary rationale for the high error level, why was this and why would this kind of behavior be particularly common in this election? And how does this square with the lack of variation in response rates across precincts that voted heavily for Kerry, heavily for Bush and in-between? (See [Mystery Pollster’s good discussion of this issue](#).)
2. If so many interviewers did so poorly, why was that? Did Edison/Mitofsky do an exceptionally poor job of selecting and training interviewers and, if so, why was that? Or is exit polling just getting harder to do, so interviewers that might have been adequate four to eight years ago are not adequate today?
3. If the sampling problems were so serious, why was that? Were they worse than in previous years and, if so, why? Did Edison/Mitofsky do a poor job of dealing with these problems or was there nothing they could have done? Should we have been using aggregated state data instead of the national data for relatively small demographic groups all along like they imply we should with this year’s data? Or, again, is there

something about the way the country's changing that's making always-existing sampling problems of the exit polls worse?

I don't know the answers to these questions. But I think they deserve answers, hopefully sooner rather than later, while there's still time to restore faith in an exit polling system that is now faced with widespread skepticism.

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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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