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by ruy teixeira

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In this edition of *Public Opinion Watch*:

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**Independents and Young People (Not to Mention the General Public)
Display Little Enthusiasm for Bush's Social Security Plan**

Westhill Partners survey of 800 registered voters for The Hotline, released February 1, 2005 (conducted January 25–27, 2005)

Roper Public Affairs poll of 1,000 adults for AARP, Rock the Vote and the Joint Center for Political and Economic Studies, released February 3, 2005 (conducted January 15–23, 2005)

Princeton Survey Research poll of 1,009 adults for Newsweek, released February 7, 2005 (conducted February 3–4, 2005)

Well, President Bush threw down the gauntlet in his February 1 State of the Union speech on his plan to privatize Social Security. Ready or not, here he comes!

So far, response to his initiative has been underwhelming and members of his own party are edging away from it, even as Democrats continue to hold firm against it. A good part of the

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reason may be seen in recent polls which continue to show the proposal performing weakly once its basic provisions are made clear. Republican politicians are understandably nervous about being associated with a loser and Democratic politicians see little reason to defect when public opinion clearly backs them.

Three new polls provide more evidence of just how difficult the public opinion climate is for Bush. The first is a Westhill Partners poll released by The Hotline last week. Among the key findings are the following:

1. Bush receives a 34 percent approval rating on handling Social Security, with 52 percent disapproval. And among independents, his rating is markedly worse: a mere 23 percent approval and 59 percent disapproval.
2. A question on the seriousness of the problems with Social Security yields just 18 percent saying that the system needs to be completely rebuilt (12 percent among independents), with 33 percent saying major changes are needed and 43 percent calling for only minor changes.
3. By 61 percent to 29 percent (66 percent to 21 percent among independents), voters say that keeping Social Security as a program with a guaranteed monthly benefit is more important than letting younger workers decide for themselves how some of their Social Security contributions are invested, with varying benefit levels depending on the success of their investments.
4. By 61 percent to 24 percent (66 percent to 16 percent among independents), voters say that Bush's November election victory does *not* mean the American people support his ideas on Social Security.
5. By 54 percent to 42 percent (61 percent to 33 percent among independents), voters say that they would not be likely to invest a portion of their Social Security taxes in the stock market if they were allowed to do so.
6. By 50 percent to 33 percent (53 percent to 25 percent among independents), voters say that they "disapprove of proposals to incorporate personal accounts into the Social Security program." (Interestingly, despite the Republicans' now-religious belief that saying "personal accounts" rather than "private accounts" somehow makes these accounts much more attractive, the half-sample that was asked this same question with private accounts substituted for personal accounts actually had a slightly less disapproving reaction.)

The second poll showing tough sledding for Bush on Social Security was conducted by Roper Public Affairs for AARP, Rock the Vote, and the Joint Center for Political and Economic Studies. The poll is particularly useful for showing how soft support for private accounts is among younger adults (eighteen to thirty-nine years of age). When supporters of private accounts (based on a question that simply describes the accounts and mentions none of the associated costs and tradeoffs) were asked a series of follow-up questions, here is what the poll found:

1. Sixty-one percent of the public (53 percent of younger adults) oppose such accounts if stock market fluctuations could result in decreased money in retirement.
2. Sixty-three percent of the public (57 percent of younger adults) oppose such accounts if they mean a lower guaranteed benefit in retirement.
3. Sixty-eight percent of the public (63 percent of younger adults) oppose such accounts if they mean massive new federal debt in order to pay current benefits.
4. Sixty-nine percent of the public (65 percent of younger adults) oppose private accounts if they would result in cuts for guaranteed benefits for everyone, not just people who choose to have such an account.
5. In addition, 53 percent of younger adults believe that private accounts paid for by Social Security money will hurt Social Security, not help it, and 75 percent of younger adults agree both that Social Security should be protected as a guaranteed benefit, not privatized, and that it isn't fair to saddle our children with additional Social Security debt by taking money out of Social Security for private accounts.

The final poll with bad news for the Bush plan is the new *Newsweek* poll, conducted entirely after Bush's State of the Union address. Here are some of the key findings:

1. Just 12 percent of the public would support cutting Social Security benefits to retirees to keep Social Security financially solvent.
2. In a completely unaided question that simply refers to "the changes to Social Security proposed by the President," 36 percent say that they oppose these changes, compared to 26 percent who favor them.
3. By 44 percent to 40 percent, the public doesn't think allowing one-third of the Social Security payroll tax to be diverted into individual savings accounts will result in a better deal for retirees than the current system.

No doubt about it, Bush has quite a sales job on his hands. Unfortunately for him, the more details of his plan that come out, the more the public seems likely to be reminded of what they don't like about it. In other words, as the data above show, his plan is only popular on the level of vague generality—anything specific and the public starts bailing out. That's a tough dynamic for a president—any president—to overcome.

2004 National Election Pool Exit Poll Data Now Available!

I have been critical of Edison/Mitofsky (E/M) for a number of things connected with the 2004 National Election Pool (NEP) exit poll, but I can't criticize them for not making their datasets easily available. They have allowed the University of Michigan's Inter-University Consortium for Political and Social Research (ICPSR) to make all their data immediately available with full documentation as part of ICPSR's FastTrack data program. That means that you, as well as

Jane and John Q. Public, can now download each and every state dataset, as well as the national dataset, with copious accompanying documentation, simply by visiting [this FTP file directory set up by ICPSR](#). Once downloaded, you can then fool around with the data to your heart's content. Have you been wondering how working class white women nationally or in Ohio (or any other state) voted in 2004? Now you can find out.

Here are a few things to note about these data, before you follow the link to the FTP site and start downloading.

1. If you are expecting to find multiple weight variables that will allow you to recreate the exit poll data as it looked in various stages of the data collection and weighting process (so that, for example, you could create datasets that would match up to [the crosstabs published on the New Zealand website, Scoop](#)), you will be disappointed. There is one and only one weighting variable provided that incorporates *all* the various sequential adjustments to the data—for nonresponse bias, for oversampling, for changing turnout patterns, *and*, of course, to match the final reported election outcome. Therefore, these data will not allow you to replicate and pick apart the adjustments made to the data at different times on and shortly after election day.
2. To get really much out of these data, you need to have and know how to use a statistical package such as SPSS. Then you can take the datafiles and analyze them in much more detail than has been made available in crosstabular form on the web and in newspapers. For those who use SPSS, things are particularly easy since E/M provides fully labeled and documented SPSS files for all states and nationally that are ready to go with no data preparation steps necessary.

But if you don't use SPSS or something similar, there's not much here for you beyond the set of final crosstabs that E/M provided to the NEP and clients. These crosstabs have already been widely circulated on the web and provide no new information.

3. In the `_ALL` directory, E/M provide a datafile that combines the data from all fifty-one state surveys and even includes a weight that adjusts each survey to represent the portion of the vote cast by each state. Nice! That means you can easily use this combined datafile to create alternative estimates to those generated by national datafile. Speaking as someone who has manually combined state datafiles to make an aggregated file in the past, I particularly appreciate this feature.
4. Documentation for the state datafiles is an improvement over past releases of exit poll data. For example, a map is provided for each state that shows the counties included in each region or "geocode" sampled within that state. And coding for all variables is clearly and thoroughly explained.

So hats off to E/M for providing easy and user-friendly access to their data. I know some will not be satisfied with the release of these data (for example, because of the provision of only one weight variable) and I myself still have many questions about how the polls were conducted and how and why the now-notorious problems with these polls arose. But let's give credit where credit's due: E/M and the NEP are providing a valuable resource about the 2004 election for

free to all who are interested. Let's go out there and use it.

What Do the Democrats Stand For?

Last week, I summarized results of the new Democracy Corps poll. Since then, Democracy Corps has released an analysis of their poll, "[Toward a Democratic Purpose](#)" that is well worth reading. Here are some key excerpts:

[O]n the key dimensions essential for the Democrats' re-emergence as a dominant national force, the party falls woefully short. As voters compare the parties, they see a Democratic Party without purpose and defining ideas; a party not at all strong (weak politically, without strong leaders and direction); not the go-to party on protecting the country; ambivalent on basic values, like right and wrong and responsibility; and only marginally ahead on advocacy for people, being on their side.

The starting point for all else is the Republicans' 28-point advantage (55 to 27 percent) on "knowing what they stand for." In focus groups, participants talk about "there are too many gray issues for Democrats" and "they've got to start standing for something. You can't be all things to all people." That is re-enforced by a sense that John Kerry was a "flip-flopper," underscoring the lack of clear direction. "Kerry one day was over here, and then he was over there. Yeah I do think that's right and no, I didn't say that," said one participant. Another said, "He's the guy that holds up the line at McDonald's." The collective impression is that Democrats have no strength of conviction or clarity of direction. That reflects the most immediate national election, but also 2002 when Democrats sought the lowest common denominator and failed to challenge the Republicans on taxes, the economy or Iraq. In the regression model, knowing what the parties stand for is one of the top predictors of party ratings. . . .

For all the problems Democrats have on clarity, strength, values and advocacy, they are nonetheless at parity with the Republicans. Imagine if this period brought new clarity, a defining framework and direction, a new unity in challenging the Republicans, greater attention to values and a passionate advocacy for average Americans.

What is striking is how much of the values playing field is contested and up for grabs. Right now, the voters mostly cannot distinguish between the parties on reform and change, opportunity, or improving America and new ideas, though Democrats begin with a small advantage. The parties are indistinguishable on being in touch, trust, being for families, shares your values, the future and ambition to do better.

Some of these should belong decisively to the Democrats. How can the out-of-power Democrats throw out the Republicans when Democrats have almost no advantage on change and reform? Given their history, how can the Democrats not own the value, opportunity? How can the pro-business and pro-wealthy Republicans be tied on being in touch? And after the decade of the nineties and the uneven growth in Bush's first term, how can the Republicans have a decided advantage on prosperity? But after the culture war waged by the Republicans, how can they have no advantage on shares your values, trustworthy, and being for families?

The party that figures out these paradoxes will tilt the playing field decisively.

Sounds like a real challenge for the Democrats. We shall see if they are up to it.

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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: www.tcf.org.