

THE CENTURY FOUNDATION

public opinion watch

by ruy teixeira

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(Covering polls and related articles from the week of January 10–17, 2005.)

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Pre-Inauguration Blues

Princeton Survey Research poll of 1,503 adults for Pew Research Center, released January 13, 2005 (conducted January 5–9, 2005)

SRBI poll of 1,002 adults for *Time* magazine, released January 14, 2005 (conducted January 12–13, 2005)

TNS poll of 1,007 adults for Washington Post/ABC News, released January 17, 2005 (conducted January 12–16, 2005)

Annenberg Election Survey poll of 1,202 adults, released January 17, 2005 (conducted January 11–16, 2005 by SRBI)

The public's got those mean old pre-inauguration blues. That's the message of four polls released over the Martin Luther King holiday weekend.

The first poll to be released was a Pew Research Center poll, their annual assessment of the public's policy priorities. Here's the lead paragraph of their report on the poll, succinctly titled "Public's Agenda Differs from President's":

George W. Bush begins his second term with considerably less popular support than other recent incumbent presidents after their reelection. He also is proposing a second-term policy agenda that differs in several key respects from the public's. Health care, aid for the poor, and the growing budget deficit are all increasingly important public priorities, while limiting lawsuit awards, making recent tax cuts permanent and tax simplification rank near the bottom of the public's agenda.

On the public's exceptionally weak support for Bush at the start of his second term, the report notes that their current poll has Bush at 50 percent approval, while their analogous poll in January, 1997 had Clinton at 59 percent approval. And earlier Gallup polls had Reagan at 62 percent in January, 1985; Nixon at 59 percent in December, 1972; Johnson at 71 percent in January, 1965; and Eisenhower at 73 percent in January, 1957.

On who will gain and lose influence during Bush's second term, the public is quite pessimistic about "people like yourself," with just 22 percent saying this group will gain influence and 34 percent saying they will lose influence. That's down from four years ago, at the beginning of Bush's first term, when, by 35 percent to 26 percent, the public felt people like themselves would gain, rather than lose, influence. The public is also pessimistic about whether older people (29 percent), blacks (26 percent), poor people (20 percent), union leaders (18 percent), and environmentalists (18 percent) will gain influence during a second Bush administration. All of these figures are significantly down from where they were four years ago.

In fact, the only groups that the public is more optimistic about than four years ago are Washington lobbyists (up from 35 percent to 40 percent in terms of gaining influence) and conservative Christians (up from 51 to 54 percent). But the groups that the public is most optimistic about today are the still same two groups that topped this list in 2001: the military and business corporations.

On prospects for the economy, fewer people today than at any time since 2001 say they believe economic conditions will be better a year from now. Only 27 percent express this optimistic viewpoint, 18 percent believe they will be worse, and most (52 percent) believe they will remain the same.

On Social Security, 49 percent say the system needs major changes or to be completely rebuilt. But that's much less than the 71 percent who say the health care system has problems of this magnitude or the 62 percent who have the same viewpoint about the educational system. And, while the poll finds support (54 percent to 30 percent) for the very general idea of having private investment accounts within Social Security (the typical finding when no tradeoffs or costs are mentioned), the poll also finds overwhelming support for the priority of "keeping Social Security as a program with a guaranteed monthly benefit based on a person's earnings during their working life" (65 percent) rather than "letting younger workers decide for themselves how some of their own contributions to Social Security are invested, which would cause their future benefits to be higher or lower depending on how well their investments perform" (29 percent).

The second poll to be released was the *Time*/SRBI poll, which focused particularly on the issue of Social Security. To begin with, the poll finds that public divided both on whether there truly is a Social Security crisis (45 percent say there is; 44 percent say that's just a scare tactic to help Bush push through his plan) and on whether they favor (44 percent) or oppose (47 percent) the general idea of allowing people to invest part of their Social Security payroll tax in stocks and bonds.

Note that the latter finding was *before* respondents were informed of any possible costs of the plan. Opposition moved to 48 percent to 41 percent if Bush's plan included a drop in

“guaranteed money from Social Security”. And when informed that Bush’s plan would include government borrowing of \$1–2 billion over ten years, in addition to the private accounts and reduction in guaranteed benefit, opposition to his plan soared to 69 percent to 21 percent.

In perhaps the most intriguing result of the survey, by a healthy twenty-three points (56 percent to 33 percent), people believe they personally would do better sticking with the current system “which pays benefits regardless of the performance of stocks and bonds” rather than “investing part of your Social Security payroll tax in stocks and bonds.”

The poll also finds the public favors a series of alternative ways to fix the Social Security system’s problem, some by wide margins. By 48 percent to 41 percent, they favor raising the cap on income that is eligible for Social Security taxation; by 58 percent to 38 percent, they favor reducing Social Security benefits for wealthy people; by 69 percent to 28 percent, they favor providing more incentives for people to work beyond the ages of sixty-two and sixty-five; and by a very impressive 73 percent to 19 percent margin, they favor allowing people to invest more in tax-deferred retirement accounts outside of Social Security.

The latter result strongly suggests that Congressional Democrats could strengthen their hands against Bush’s Social Security privatization push by focusing attention on a plan to provide private accounts outside of Social Security, such as [the one advocated by Gene Sperling of the Center for American Progress](#).

Two polls were released on Monday (*Washington Post*/ABC and Annenberg). [The Washington Post story on the Washington Post/ABC poll](#) led with the following:

President Bush will begin his second term in office without a clear mandate to lead the nation, with strong disapproval of his policies in Iraq and with the public both hopeful and dubious about his leadership on the issues that will dominate his agenda, according to a *Washington Post*-ABC News poll.

On the eve of Thursday’s presidential inaugural ceremonies, the survey found few signs that the country has begun to come together since Bush defeated Sen. John F. Kerry (D-Mass.) two months ago. The president has claimed a mandate from the election, but the poll found as much division today as four years ago over the question of whether Bush or Democrats in Congress should set the direction for the country.

Fewer than half of those interviewed—45 percent—said they preferred that the country go in the direction that Bush wanted to lead it, whereas 39 percent said Democrats should lead the way. During the first months of his presidency, after the bitterly disputed 2000 election, Americans said they preferred Bush to take the lead by 46 percent to 36 percent.

Bush’s approval ratings, both overall and in particular areas, are pretty close to [the generally poor Gallup ratings I have commented on previously](#). But it’s worth noting that in the currently hot areas of Iraq (40 percent) and Social Security (38 percent) his ratings are actually

two to three points lower than in that earlier Gallup poll and tied for the lowest he has ever received on these issues in the *Washington Post/ABC* poll.

Other findings on Iraq underscore the president's difficulties in that area. By 55 percent to 44 percent, the public now thinks that the war with Iraq wasn't worth fighting, the second most negative reading on this question (the most negative was in the previous *Washington Post/ABC* poll). On whether the war with Iraq has contributed to the long-term security of the United States—a question that always has tended to produce relatively positive responses (compared to, for example, asking whether the Iraq war has made us safer from terrorist attacks)—the public gives its most negative response yet, with almost as many saying the Iraq war hasn't contributed to long-term security (47 percent) as say it has (50 percent).

On Social Security, the public not only gives him a very low approval rating (noted above), but also says it trusts congressional Democrats (50 percent) more than Bush (37 percent) to handle the issue. And young people (age eighteen to thirty), in particular, have little confidence in Bush on Social Security: just 33 percent approve of the way he is handling the issue, compared to 60 percent who disapprove, and by 59 percent to 32 percent, they say that they trust congressional Democrats more than Bush to handle the issue.

And these are the voters who are going to power the Republican drive to transform Social Security? Seems hard to believe based on these data.

On the specific plan Bush is putting forward to deal with Social Security, the *Washington Post/ABC* poll reports markedly more positive results for that plan than almost all recent polls, including the Pew and *Time* polls summarized above. A question that mentions a change in the guaranteed benefit returns a close split (48 percent opposed/47 percent in favor) and a question that mentions this change in guaranteed benefit along with “a stock market option for Social Security contributions” returns a 54 percent to 41 percent majority in support.

How can this be—how did the *Washington Post/ABC* poll come up results so radically different from other polls?

Simple. It's all in the question wording. The change in the guaranteed benefit that is mentioned in the *Washington Post/ABC* questions is *not* described as a cut in the guaranteed benefit but rather as “a reduction in the rate of growth in Social Security benefits for future retirees”—a question wording that no doubt elicited broad smiles down at the White House and in the offices of congressional Republican leaders.

And I'm sure it's true that if the massive cut in guaranteed benefits proposed by Bush is uniformly referred to simply as a reduction in the rate of growth of benefits, Bush's plan could have pretty smooth sailing. But of course that's not where the debate is going to take place and it's rather odd that the *Washington Post/ABC* poll chose to use the locution favored in RNC talking points, rather than the straightforward wording favored by other pollsters.

So these particular results should be treated very skeptically. In particular, no one should suppose that congressional Democrats' criticism of Bush's proposed cut in guaranteed benefits

is likely to be ineffective, based on the *Washington Post*/ABC findings. **Noam Scheiber is all over this one** and his assessment is worth quoting at length:

According to the *Post*, the response [to the proposed change in guaranteed benefits] was basically a wash: 48 percent opposed the idea, 47 percent supported it. So does that mean it would be hard for Democrats to defeat privatization by emphasizing benefit cuts?

Noooooo!!!!!!

What would be a wash is a debate in which one side argues: "To help keep the Social Security system funded, we want to reduce the rate of growth in guaranteed benefits for future retirees by up to one and a half percent a year." And the other side argues: "We oppose reducing the rate of growth in guaranteed benefits for future retirees by up to one and a half percent a year, even though it would help keep the Social Security system funded and would, truth be told, be the responsible thing to do."

What would not be a wash is a debate in which one side argues: "To help keep the Social Security system funded, we want to reduce the rate of growth in guaranteed benefits for future retirees by up to one and a half percent a year." And the other side argues: "Bush will SLASH your Social Security benefits." Or, even better, "Bush will SLASH your Social Security benefits by \$4 TRILLION," which is the kind of cut we're talking about.

Note to congressional Democrats: If there's something in here that doesn't make sense, please see "Medicare, slowing growth of, 1995," in your handbook.

Exactly.

The final poll to be considered here is the new Annenberg survey. Here's the lead paragraph from their report on the new poll:

George W. Bush will be sworn in this week to lead a nation giving him a lukewarm approval rating, unenthusiastic about his ideas on Social Security, impatient to get out of Iraq and showing no signs of post-election reconciliation, the University of Pennsylvania's National Annenberg Election Survey shows.

The poll's specific findings on Social Security include startlingly lopsided 86 percent to 11 percent opposition to a proposal worded as "[w]hen current workers retire, giving them lower benefits than what they are now promised". Note the huge difference with the *Washington Post*/ABC finding, though both questions are referring to the same proposal.

The Annenberg survey also finds that only 18 percent of the public favors Bush's plan to both reduce "promised benefits and current taxes by allowing workers to invest some of their Social Security contributions in the stock market" once it is mentioned that such a plan would entail borrowing as much as \$2 trillion to cover benefits for people who have paid into the current system.

And on Bush's alleged election mandate to transform Social Security, here is what the public has to say: just 23 percent think his election victory means the American people support his ideas about changing Social Security, while 65 percent do not. And of those who said he did not have such support from the American people as a whole, only 19 percent believe he even has such support *from the people who voted for him*. Finally, by 50 percent to 32 percent, the public says they personally do not support his ideas about Social Security.

The survey finds strikingly negative views of the situation in Iraq. On whether the situation in Iraq was worth going to war over, 54 percent say no and just 40 percent say yes. On whether Bush has a clear plan to bring the situation in Iraq to a successful conclusion, 62 percent say no and 32 percent say yes. On whether the election in Iraq will produce a stable government or not, 60 percent say no and 29 percent say yes.

And here are some particularly eye-opening results. When asked what the United States should do if the Iraq election does not produce a stable government, only 39 percent say the United States should stay as long as necessary to provide stability, while 56 percent say the United States should start pulling out its troops right away (31 percent) or set a date for later this year when troop pullouts will start (25 percent).

Even starker, by more than two to one (67 percent to 32 percent), the public agrees that "[d]emocracy and freedom in Iraq are important, but the war has cost the United States too much in lives and money already to stay much longer."

Will the pre-inauguration blues for the public turn into the post-inauguration blues for Bush and the Republicans? Stay tuned.

Democrats and Single Women

A bright spot for the Democrats in the 2004 election was their performance among single women. That fact has been noted here and there by observers (including John Judis and myself in [our recent *American Prospect* article](#)) but [a just-released report by Greenberg Quinlan Rosner for Women's Voices/Women Vote](#) documents this trend in much more detail than anyone else has. Among the key findings of the report:

In a year with high turnout, unmarried women increased their numbers, and were one of the few demographic groups to increase their share of the electorate. As a percentage of the electorate, they moved from 19 percent in 2000 to 22.4 percent in 2004, an increase of roughly 7 million votes. Unmarried women constituted as large a share of the electorate as African Americans, Latinos and Jews combined.

The marriage gap is one of the most important cleavages in electoral politics. Unmarried women voted for Kerry by a 25-point margin (62 to 37 percent), while married women voted for President Bush by an 11-point margin (55 percent to 44 percent). Indeed, the 25-point margin Kerry posted among unmarried women represented one of the high water marks for the Senator among all demographic groups.

The marriage gap is a defining dynamic in today's politics, eclipsing the gender gap, with marital status a significant predictor of the vote, independent of the effects of age, race, income, education or gender. Marital status had a significant effect on the way in which these voters performed, whereas a voter's gender did not. This was true of all age groups. Younger unmarried women supported Kerry while younger married women supported President Bush. Unmarried 18-29 year olds gave Kerry a 25 point margin, while younger married women, like their older counterparts, gave President Bush an 11 point margin.

The 2004 election brought many new unmarried women to the polls. Nineteen percent were voting for the first time, versus only 6 percent of married women. . . .

White voters supported President Bush overall, but Kerry performed well among white unmarried women. White voters generally supported President Bush in the election (58 percent to 41 percent), but Kerry performed strongly among white unmarried women (55 percent to 44 percent).

Unmarried women are social and economic progressives advancing a tolerant set of values. They believe government should play a role in providing affordable health care, a secure retirement, equal pay, and education opportunities for themselves and their children. They support a woman's right to choose and gay rights, including marriage.

Unmarried women were strongly opposed to the war in Iraq. They believe that the Bush Administration's pursuit of the war made America less safe, not more secure. This is the opposite conclusion from that drawn by many blue-collar voters.

Clearly single women are a very good and growing constituency for the Democrats. The report does not, however, address how to appeal directly to this constituency without aggravating the Democrats' already existing problems among married women voters. That would be a useful subject for debate among Democrats because this report demonstrates that single women voters could be a critically important source of Democratic votes in the future. If that source can be further tapped without worsening Democratic performance among married women—or, ideally, with improving that performance—the Democrats could have a winning formula.

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.