

# THE CENTURY FOUNDATION

## public opinion watch

by ruy teixeira

**January 26, 2005**

*(Covering polls and related articles from the week of January 17–23, 2005.)*

In this edition of *Public Opinion Watch*:

**A Nation of Unhappy Campers**  
**The Public's Health Care Agenda**

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

### A Nation of Unhappy Campers

**Gallup poll of 1,007 adults for CNN/USA Today**, released January 18, 2005 (conducted January 14-16, 2005)

**Los Angeles Times poll of 1,033 adults**, released January 18, 2005 (conducted January 15-17, 2005)

**Hart/McInturff poll of 1,007 adults for Wall Street Journal/NBC News**, released January 20, 2005 (conducted January 13-17, 2005)

**New York Times/CBS News poll of 1,118 adults**, released January 20, 2005 (conducted January 14-18, 2005)

---

So many polls, so little time. In the last few days before Bush's inauguration, four more major public polls were released, in addition to the four I discussed in **last week's edition** of *Public Opinion Watch*. By and large, the tale told by these polls is consistent with the story I laid out in that earlier analysis: we are a nation of unhappy campers at the beginning of Bush's second term. And he has quite a challenge in front of him to win these unhappy campers over, given his relatively unpopular agenda and apparent contempt for the political center.

---

The Century Foundation conducts public policy research and analyses of economic, social, and foreign policy issues, including inequality, retirement security, election reform, media studies, homeland security, and international affairs. The foundation produces books, reports, and other publications, convenes task forces, and working groups and operates eight informational Web sites. With offices in New York City and Washington, D.C., The Century Foundation is nonprofit and nonpartisan and was founded in 1919 by Edward A. Filene.

**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)

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

Here are some of the more interesting findings from these new polls:

*New York Times/CBS News Poll*

1. When asked whether things in the United States are going better than, worse than, or the same as five years ago, just 20 percent say better, 56 percent say worse, and 21 percent say the same. Compare that to responses at the beginning of “Poppa” Bush’s term in 1989 (44 percent better/26 percent worse/23 percent same) and at the beginning of Reagan’s second term in 1985 (57 percent better/26 percent worse/11 percent same). Evidently the younger Bush has a different coalition-building strategy than Reagan-era Republicans: make things worse!
  2. The public is more likely to believe the next four years of Bush’s presidency will divide Americans (47 percent) than bring them together (44 percent).
  3. Expectations of progress in other areas during Bush’s second term are minimal: only 17 percent think the United States will be more respected in the world; 33 percent think the economy will be better than it is today; 29 percent think the United States will be safer from terrorism; 24 percent believe the educational system will be better; 15 percent believe the price they pay for prescription drugs will be lower; and just 9 percent think their taxes will be lower. Even on Iraq, only 38 percent believe there will be fewer troops there four long years from now. And 66 percent believe the federal budget deficit will be bigger.
  4. Speaking of the deficit, almost four-fifths (78 percent) say it is not possible to overhaul Social Security, cut taxes, and pay for the war in Iraq (all of which Bush proposes to do) without running up the budget deficit.
  5. Another of Bush’s schemes is to maintain and extend the system in which income from investments and interest is taxed less than income from wages and salaries. Only 28 percent endorse that approach, while 66 percent say investment income should be taxed either at the same rate (54 percent) or at a higher one (12 percent).
  6. By 50–45 percent, the public says it is bad idea to allow “individuals to invest portions of their Social Security taxes on their own, which might allow them to make more money for their retirement, but would involve greater risk.” That is the most negative judgment on Social Security privatization since this poll first started asking the question in mid-2000. Moreover, support for the proposition drops to 22 percent when it is posited that establishing personal accounts would reduce the guaranteed benefit by as much as a third.
- As for whether they would actually be likely to invest in the stock market through these personal accounts, just 39 percent say they would be likely to do so. And that figure drops to 30 percent, when it is pointed out that the personal accounts would be accompanied by a drop in the guaranteed benefit.

And in terms of Bush's motivations in seeking changes to the Social Security system, 50 percent say he is primarily trying to help Wall Street investment companies, compared to 40 percent who think he is trying to help average Americans.

7. On Iraq, the number saying we did the right thing in taking military action against Iraq is down to 45 percent, tied for the lowest ever. And, for the first time, a majority (53 percent to 41 percent) say that the war in Iraq will not have been worth the costs if we never find weapons of mass destruction there.

A majority (52–41 percent) also believes that it is not possible for the United States to create a stable democracy in Iraq and that Bush is making the situation in Iraq today sound better than it really is (55 percent). Just 15 percent believe violence in Iraq will decline after the election, and a mere 18 percent believe Bush has a clear plan for dealing with the situation in Iraq (down twenty points from before November's election).

In terms of the war's effect on terrorist threats against the United States, less than a fifth (19 percent) think such threats have been decreased, while 33 percent say they have increased and 47 percent think they have stayed the same.

#### *Wall Street Journal/NBC News poll*

Are we better off than we were four years ago? The administration's best marks come from the realm of national security, where 40 percent say they feel we are better off. After that, the scores drop off as follows: optimism about the future (35 percent), economic conditions (25 percent), moral values and standards (23 percent), the education system (20 percent), America's standing in the world (16 percent), and partisanship in Washington (just 10 percent).

2. How should the Democrats conduct themselves in Congress? By 57–33 percent, the public thinks Democrats should provide a balance so Bush and the Republicans do not go too far, rather than work in a bipartisan fashion to pass Bush's legislative priorities.

3. On Social Security, 50 percent say it is a bad idea, compared to 40 percent who say it is a good idea, to change the Social Security system to allow workers to invest their Social Security contributions in the stock market. A more complicated question, one that pits "making some adjustments" to Social Security and "running the risk that the system will fall short of money" (44 percent) versus "changing the Social Security system" to allow private accounts and "running the risk that some people will lose money . . . due to drops in the stock market" (46 percent) yields close to an even split.

Does Bush have a mandate "to allow workers to invest some of their Social Security taxes in the stock market"? By a wide 56–33 percent margin, the public says no. And here is an interesting finding: this poll gave respondents a "serious trouble, but not in a crisis" option in its question assessing perceptions of how dire the financial situation of Social Security is. The result: just 14 percent say Social Security is in a "crisis," with another 38 percent opting for the less apocalyptic "in serious trouble, but not in a crisis" (another 45 percent say the system is in some trouble or not really in trouble at all). A similar question asked about the financial

situation of Social Security in ten to twenty years returned only a 23 percent response that the system's financial situation will be in crisis at that time.

4., On Iraq, 52 percent say "removing Saddam Hussein from power" was worth the costs of the war, compared to 40 percent who say it was not (tied for the most negative reading on this question in the poll).

*Los Angeles Times poll*

1. In terms of how much progress the government in Washington will make solving the major problems facing the country, only 18 percent say "a great deal" or "quite a lot"; 77 percent say "only some" or "not much at all."

2. In terms of economic policies, about a quarter (26 percent) think Bush's economic policies have made the country better off in the last four years; 71 percent think these policies have made the country worse off (43 percent) or left it about the same (28 percent). In addition, 51 percent believe Bush cares most about rich people, compared to 3 percent who say he cares most about the poor, 7 percent who think he cares most about those in middle-income range, and 35 percent who say he cares equally about all income groups. And, by 62–26 percent, the public believes Bush cares more about protecting the interests of large business corporations than about those of ordinary working people.

3. By an overwhelming 71–25 percent margin, the public believes Bush should compromise with Democrats on his issues rather than proceed as if he has a mandate to push through his agenda.

4. On Social Security, by a 52–42 margin (64–33 among independents), the public disapproves of the idea of allowing workers to divert payroll tax money to private investment accounts, given a trade-off between the possibility these accounts could earn "a higher rate of return in the stock market" and the possibility the stock market might be "too unpredictable." And when a follow-up is asked about supporting private accounts if such accounts meant a reduction in guaranteed benefits, support drops to just 23 percent. The latter figure is consistent with other polls and suggests hard-core support for Social Security privatization is no more than one-fifth to one-quarter of the public.

5. A similar exercise finds the 54 percent support for making Bush's tax cuts permanent falling to 34 percent if making the tax cuts permanent meant the federal budget would remain in deficit. The poll also finds that 58 percent believe the rich have been the primary beneficiaries of the tax cuts instead of middle-income earners (25 percent) or the poor (5 percent) and that an economic agenda focused on infrastructure improvements (60 percent) rather than tax cuts (34 percent) would do the best job stimulating the nation's economy.

6. On Iraq, by 56–39 percent, the public now says the situation in Iraq was not worth going to war over (62–35 percent among independents). Only 24 percent believe the war in Iraq has stabilized the situation in the Middle East; only 29 percent believe the United States is winning the war in Iraq; only 31 percent believe the impending Iraq election will lead to significant

improvement in the Iraq security situation; only 23 percent believe the Iraqis are ready to govern their country without American help; and just 10 percent think U.S. involvement has helped the country's image around the world, compared to 65 percent who believe our image has been hurt.

Further, 47 percent agree that the invasion of Iraq has alienated many in the Muslim world, which will increase the risk of terrorism against the United States, compared to 44 percent who say the overthrow of Saddam and installation of a new government will encourage changes in the Middle East that will reduce the risk of terrorism.

Sounds like tough sledding ahead for the administration's current, non-WMD-based rationale for the Iraq war.

*CNN/USA Today/Gallup poll*

1. In Bush's first term, the public thought the administration "improved military security for the country" (62–36 percent) and "improved moral values" in the United States (50–49 percent). After that, it is all negative: by 50–46 percent, the public believes the Bush administration failed to keep America prosperous; by 48–46 percent, that it neglected to "cut your taxes" (!); by 52–45 percent, that it did not improve education or increase respect for the presidency; by 63–31 percent, that it failed to improve the quality of the environment; by 63–28 percent, that it was incapable of ensuring the long-term strength of the Medicare system; by 65–32 percent, that it mishandled its opportunity to improve respect for the United States abroad; by 68–27 percent, that it could not manage to heal "political divisions in this country"; by 69–26 percent, that it failed to improve the health care system; and, by 74–18 percent, that it did not take care to ensure the long-term strength of the Social Security system.

Now there is a magnificent record.

2. Sorry, George, no mandate here either. By 58–36 percent, the public believes that, since the election was so close, Bush should emphasize programs both parties support rather than claim a "mandate" to advance the GOP's agenda.

3. On Iraq, the mistake watch continues: in this latest Gallup poll, the number saying that the United States "made a mistake sending troops to Iraq" is now up to 52 percent, continuing the steady rise in this indicator since right before November's election.

All in all, these polls, while they are not without areas of strength for Bush--most obviously, of course, on broad, non-Iraq security issues--do suggest that we are, in many important ways, a nation of unhappy campers. And a nation of unhappy campers can easily turn into a seriously restive electorate by 2006–2008. In fact, based on these data, if time-for-a-change voting were a stock, I would be buying.

## The Public's Health Care Agenda

**ICR poll of 1,396 adults for Kaiser Family Foundation/Harvard School of Public Health, released January 11, 2005 (conducted November 4-28, 2004)**

---

Bush has made it clear he has *his* agenda for America's health care problems: capping medical malpractice awards. A newly released poll by the Kaiser Family Foundation/Harvard School of Public Health makes it clear that this goal is only a minor part of the public's health care agenda. In this poll, respondents were given a series of twelve health care reforms to rate as priorities. Reducing jury awards in malpractice suits came in eleventh out of these twelve items. Just 26 percent said it should be a top priority, compared to these figures for the three leading proposed health care reforms: 63 percent said lowering the cost of health care and insurance should be a top priority; 58 percent said making Medicare more financially sound for the future should be; and 57 percent said increasing the number of Americans with insurance should be.

The poll also finds that Bush's signature accomplishment in the health care field, the Medicare reform bill that established a prescription drug benefit within that program, remains unpopular with the very group, seniors, who were the intended beneficiaries. Just 29 percent have a favorable impression of the new law, and 70 percent believe lawmakers in Washington should work to redress problems that have arisen. The three fundamental problems people have with the law are that it is too complicated for people on Medicare to understand (81 percent say this problem needs fixing), that it does not do enough to lower prescription drug prices (78 percent), and that it does not provide people on Medicare enough help with their prescription drug costs (also 78 percent).

---

***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).