

THE CENTURY FOUNDATION

public opinion watch

by ruy teixeira

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(Covering polls and related articles from the week of July 4–10, 2005)

In this edition of *Public Opinion Watch*:

The Growth of Antiwar Sentiment

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The Growth of Antiwar Sentiment

Antiwar sentiment is growing and deepening among the public, as violence in Iraq continues unabated and progress in ending the conflict becomes ever more difficult to perceive. A recent report by Gallup usefully summarizes how public opinion in this area is evolving.

The report, "[Americans Divide Into Four Groups on Iraq War](#)," partitions the public by combining the answers to two questions: (1) whether or not they think United States made a "mistake in sending troops to Iraq"; and (2) whether the United States should set a timetable for withdrawing its troops, and stick to it regardless of what is happening in Iraq.

Based on data from their June 24–26 poll, when both of these questions were asked, the public divides as follows. The largest group (36 percent) think both that the war was a mistake *and* that the United States should set and stick to a timetable for withdrawing troops. Then, 14 percent believe the war was a mistake but think the United States should keep a significant number of troops in Iraq until the situation stabilizes, rather than set a timetable. An identical proportion believe the war was not a mistake, but believe we now should set a timetable to leave. Finally, 30 percent believe both that the war was not a mistake and that the United States should not set a timetable for troop withdrawal. (Note that among independents, the solid antiwar group has now grown to 39 percent, with just 23 percent being solidly prowar.)

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That the solid antiwar group is now the largest group is significant. And it will inevitably grow larger if present trends continue—that is, if sentiment that the Iraq war was a mistake continues to strengthen and public appetite for some kind of withdrawal timetable continues to escalate. Such trends will pull more and more people out of the two mixed groups into the unambiguously antiwar camp. Once that camp starts approaching half the population, the administration's position will become tenuous indeed.

On the other hand, the existence of the two mixed groups means Democrats cannot assume most of the public is currently antiwar in, say, the manner of the typical Democratic activist (the war was a colossal blunder and we need to get out of Iraq as soon as possible). That will take some time and, meanwhile, Democrats need to be sensitive to the conflicting views shared by a substantial part of public.

Caution is particularly advisable on the issue of withdrawing U.S. troops and how fast this should be done. [Chris Bowers of MyDD](#) has helpfully rounded up the latest polling results on the withdrawal issue, so that the large variations in public sentiment for withdrawal, depending on how withdrawal is described, can be plainly seen:

Gallup Poll. June 29–30, 2005. N = 883 adults nationwide. MoE \pm 4.

"If you had to choose, which do you think is better? For the U.S. to keep a significant number of troops in Iraq until the situation there gets better, even if that takes many years. OR, To set a time-table for removing troops from Iraq and to stick to that timetable regardless of what is going on in Iraq at the time." Options rotated

No timetable	48
Stick to timetable	49

ABC News/*Washington Post* Poll. June 23–26, 2005. N = 1,004 adults nationwide. MoE \pm 3 (for all adults). Fieldwork by TNS

"Do you think the United States should keep its military forces in Iraq until civil order is restored there, even if that means continued U.S. military casualties; or do you think the United States should withdraw its military forces from Iraq in order to avoid further U.S. military casualties, even if that means civil order is not restored there?" Options rotated

Stay	58
Withdraw	41

Associated Press/Ipsos poll conducted by Ipsos–Public Affairs. June 20–22, 2005. N = 1,000 adults nationwide. MoE \pm 3.1.

"Should the United States keep troops in Iraq until the situation has stabilized, or should the United States bring its troops home from Iraq immediately?"

Stay in Iraq	59
Bring Home	37

Pew Research Center for the People & the Press survey conducted by Princeton Survey Research Associates International. June 8–12, 2005. N = 1,464 adults nationwide. MoE

± 3.

“Do you think the U.S. should keep military troops in Iraq until the situation has stabilized, or do you think the U.S. should bring its troops home as soon as possible?”

Keep Troops	50
Bring Home	46

The Harris Poll. June 7–12, 2005. N = 1,015 adults nationwide. MoE ± 3.

“Do you favor keeping a large number of U.S. troops in Iraq until there is a stable government there OR bringing most of our troops home in the next year?”

Wait for Stable Govt	33
Bring Home in Next Year	63

The first question is the Gallup question already discussed, where a timetable for removing troops is counterposed to keeping a large numbers of troops in Iraq until things “get better.” That meets with a split response, as does the Pew question which counterposes bringing troops home “as soon as possible” to keeping troops in Iraq until the situation stabilizes. No clear majority either way on these questions.

But when immediate withdrawal is thrown into the equation, as in the Ipsos–Associated Press question, a strong majority forms against that option and for keeping trooping in Iraq. On the other hand, when a specific time period for withdrawal is mentioned (a year) and withdrawal is of “most,” rather than all troops, a strong majority forms in favor of withdrawal and against indefinite maintenance of a large U.S. troop presence.

This suggests Democrats will do best with an approach that steers away from immediate withdrawal, but highlights a specific timeline for partial, but not complete, withdrawal. Such an approach should be acceptable to the solid antiwar group discussed above, as well as providing a relatively unthreatening option for those in the mixed groups who are moving toward solid opposition to the war, but still harbor conflicting sentiments about it.

Did the London Bombings Increase Support for the Iraq War?

Did the London bombings increase support for the Iraq war, as many speculated it might? In a word, no. Here are [the results of the latest Gallup poll](#), showing no increase—in fact, a general decrease—in support for the Iraq war and Bush’s foreign policy after the bombings.

1. In the Gallup poll prior to the July 7 bombings, 46 percent said it was worth going to war in Iraq and 52 percent said it was not. In the new poll, conducted July 7–10, 44 percent say it was worth going to war, compared to 53 percent who say it wasn’t.
2. In the pre-bombings Gallup poll, 44 percent said the war in Iraq has made the United States safer from terrorism, while 39 percent said it has made us less safe. In the new poll, those figures have changed dramatically: 54 percent now say the war in Iraq has

made us *less* safe, compared to just 40 percent who say it has made us safer. Most of this change appears to be attributable to people switching from the view that the war in Iraq has had no effect on the safety of the United States to the view that the war has made us less safe.

In light of what just happened, one can see why these fence-sitters switched.

3. In the new poll, 52 percent say the war with Iraq has made the world less safe from terrorism, compared to 40 percent who say it's made the world safer (question not asked in pre-bombings Gallup poll, so no recent comparison available).
4. As for who's winning the war against terrorism, the view that the United States and its allies are winning declined to 34 percent in the new poll, down two points from before the bombings, while the view that neither side is winning is up three points to 44 percent and the view the terrorists are winning is up a point to 21 percent.
5. Finally, those expressing a great deal of confidence in the Bush administration to protect U.S. citizens from future acts of terrorism is unchanged at 23 percent from before the bombings. That 23 percent figure, however, is down from 38 percent in early February.

In short, it looks like the London bombings have simply deepened the political trouble the Bush administration faces from its Iraq policy and its increasingly vexed relationship to the overall war on terror.

Meanwhile, Back on the Economic Front

As support for the Iraq war continues to ebb (even after the London bombings—see above), let's not forget how little support Bush has for what he's doing on the economic front.

A recent report by Gallup, "[Bush's Economic Report Card Shows Little Progress](#)," notes the following:

Americans remain concerned about the economy, as more say they expect it to get worse than get better, and Bush's economic approval rating stands at 41%, with 55% disapproving.

Gallup asks the public on a monthly basis if Bush's economic policies are "helping the economy, not having much effect, or hurting the economy." The trend line over the last five months shows consistently lackluster ratings. Slightly more than a third of Americans (36%) say Bush's economic policies are hurting the economy. This percentage has remained fairly steady, with a high point of 40% in April. A similar percentage of Americans (37%) say the president's policies are not having much of an effect. About one in every four Americans (24%), on the other hand, say the president's policymaking has helped the economy, and this percentage has hovered within a five-point range since February.

So only about a quarter of the public (and just 16 percent of self-identified moderates) believe Bush's economic policies are actually helping the country. That should make the economy another difficult issue for the Republican party in 2006. As [Democracy Corps' report on their recent poll](#) puts it:

Iraq will certainly be an issue, but do not underestimate the power of the economy. Structurally, this economy is not producing enough jobs to seriously tighten the labor market or enough income and benefits for people to feel they are making gains. When asked whether this economy is doing well (creating jobs, rising incomes and home ownership and moving in the right direction) or not doing well (jobs scarce, incomes stagnant and benefits cut), a large majority (60 percent) are very clear that this economy is not performing for people.

Ah, but how to translate this economic dissatisfaction into the political coin of the realm, actual votes on election day? That's the difficult part and, in the last couple of elections, Democrats have had little success doing just that.

An easy answer is: new ideas on the economy. But, as Jonathan Chait usefully reminds us in his *New Republic* piece, "[The Case Against New Ideas: Policies Aren't What Matters in Politics](#)," Democrats don't lack for ideas, many of them fairly new, and, in fact, Democrats' ideas tend to more resemble real ideas (as opposed to slogans) and to be more carefully worked-out than those of their Republican opponents. Moreover, there is little evidence that voters actually pay much attention to detailed ideas, however new, about public policy.

So is there no ideas problem in the Democratic party? Depends on what you mean by "ideas," [as Mark Schmitt points out in an excellent post](#) on his Decembrist blog. It may be true that voters pay little attention to the details of policy ideas, but they do pay attention to what parties generally stand for and where, in general, they propose to take the country. And they do pay attention to the results of parties' policies once they are in office.

The Democrats could use new ideas, therefore, but:

1. Those ideas should sum up clearly and simply what the party stands for and where it proposes to take the country.
2. Those ideas should be few in number and easily reduced to a key principle or two that can be transmitted to voters—otherwise voters are unlikely to pay much attention.
3. Those ideas should actually work in practice, so that voters will see the benefits of having the party in office and reward it with additional electoral success.

If Democrats can produce ideas on the economy that meet these criteria, I think they have an excellent chance of capitalizing, both short-term and long-term, on voter dissatisfaction with Republican management of the economy.

Otherwise, not.

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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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