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public opinion watch

by ruy teixeira

July 27, 2005

(Covering polls and related articles from the week of July 18-24, 2005)

In this edition of *Public Opinion Watch*:

Main Political Supports of Bush Presidency Seriously Weakened Whites Moving Away from GOP

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Main Political Supports of Bush Presidency Seriously Weakened

Bush may very well get his Supreme Court nominee through without much trouble. But that's likely to help him only marginally, because the Pew Research Center has just released two new reports on their latest poll, "[Republicans Uncertain on Rove Resignation](#)" and "[More Say Iraq War Hurts Fight Against War on Terrorism](#)," which together show that the main political supports of Bush's presidency have become seriously weakened.

Character

Bush has benefitted during his presidency from positive public perceptions of his character, which have seemed relatively immune to fallout from his many policy failures. No longer. Public views of Bush's character have apparently taken a nose-dive since the last time Pew asked people for their impressions of Bush's character.

In fall of 2003, 62 percent said that Bush was trustworthy and just 32 percent said that he was not, a thirty-point positive margin. Today, however, it's almost an even split—49 percent say that he's trustworthy and 46 percent say that he isn't. Similarly, he's slipped from 56 percent he does/38 percent he doesn't on "cares about people like me" to 48 percent/49 percent today.

The biggest shift has been on "able to get things done," which has fallen from 68 percent/26 percent to 50 percent/42 percent today. And even characteristics like "a strong leader" (68

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HEADQUARTERS: 41 EAST 70TH STREET – NEW YORK, NY 10021 – 212.535.4441 – 212.535.7534 (FAX) – 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

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percent/29 percent to 55 percent/41 percent) and “warm and friendly” (70 percent/23 percent to 57 percent/37 percent) have declined substantially.

Across the board, those stellar character ratings which supposedly meant Bush could weather any political storm have become mediocre to poor. And he’s lost the most ground among independents, only 38 percent of whom now believe that Bush is trustworthy or cares about people like them. Even more amazing, less than half (48 percent) of independents now think Bush is a strong leader, which is a massive twenty-four-point decline since Pew’s previous measurement.

And how about this: in February of this year, the two leading one word descriptions of Bush were “honest” and “good,” cited by 38 percent and 20 percent of the public, respectively. Today, honest has declined to 31 percent, closely followed by “incompetent” (26 percent, up from 14 percent) and “arrogant” (24 percent, up from 15 percent).

Karl Rove

Another mainstay of Bush’s presidency has been Karl Rove. But he’s starting to seem more a liability than an asset. As **ABC News** reported the other day, only a quarter of the public think the White House is cooperating fully in the investigation of the “outing” of undercover CIA agent Valerie Plame (married to Bush critic Joseph Wilson). Rove is a central target of that investigation and administration attempts to shield him are just contributing to the erosion of public trust in Bush and his administration.

Right now, more believe Rove is guilty of a serious offence than not (32 percent to 23 percent) and more believe he should resign than not (39 percent to 23 percent). But many haven’t heard enough to have an opinion, so the percentage of the public calling for his resignation still is not that high.

However, among the half of the public that has been following the story closely (which makes this story roughly as big as the Trent Lott resignation and much bigger than the Delay ethics controversy), almost three-fifths (58 percent, including 69 percent of independents) call for Rove’s resignation, compared to just 26 percent who don’t. Similarly, those who think Rove is guilty of a serious offense rises to 47 percent among the attentive public (54 percent among independents), with 29 percent dissenting.

The War on Terror

But the most important support of the Bush presidency is, by far, the war on terror and the public’s belief that Bush and his policies are keeping them safe. That belief now appears to have eroded considerably.

Start with the Iraq war. Right now, Bush’s approval rating on Iraq is down to 35 percent with 57 percent disapproval. That’s the lowest his rating has ever been in this poll.

That’s bad, but the really significant news here is that *the public is now concluding that the Iraq war has had a negative effect on the war on terror and on their safety from terrorist attacks.* For

example, an eight-point plurality in the poll (47 percent to 39 percent) now believe the Iraq war has hurt, not helped, the war on terror. This is the first time views have been so negative about the Iraq war's effect on the war on terror. And the public now believes, by two to one (45 percent to 22 percent) that the Iraq war has increased, rather than decreased, the changes for terror attacks on the United States.

Reflecting these views, Bush's approval rating on handling terrorist threats has sunk to 49 percent, only the second time that his approval rating in his premier area has dipped below 50 percent. It is unlikely to be the last time given how the public is starting to view the Iraq war.

Pew provides an interesting table comparing different groups' views from today and about a year ago on Iraq war's effect on the war on terrorism. Scrutinizing the table it is clear that white women, as opposed to white men or nonwhites, are mostly driving the overall public move toward the position that the Iraq war has hurt the war on terror. This is particularly significant because it is white women, primarily on the basis of security issues, who moved the most toward Bush in the 2004 election and provided much of his victory margin in that election.

If these voters are starting to conclude that the GOP is not doing a good job protecting them and may, in fact, be making them *less* safe, the implications for the GOP in 2006 and beyond could be profound.

Whites Moving Away from GOP

Pundits like to point out how dependent the Democrats are on the minority vote and, therefore, how vulnerable the Democrats would be to any weakening in that support. True enough. But it's also true—perhaps even more so—that the GOP is utterly dependent on high levels of support among whites and, therefore quite vulnerable to any weakening of support among these voters.

And weakening of white support for the GOP appears to be precisely what's happening—though you'd never guess it from the deafening silence among the very pundits who like to tut-tut about the Democrats' dependence on the minority vote. Here are some very interesting figures from a recently-released Gallup report, "**Black Support for Bush, GOP, Remains Low**," based on results of their 2005 and earlier minority relations polls.

1. In June of 2004, Bush's approval rating among non-Hispanic whites was 61 percent. This June, it's down to 47 percent, with 48 percent disapproval. In contrast, Bush's approval ratings among blacks is flat-lined at 16 percent in the two polls, while Hispanics haven't really budged either, giving Bush a 40 percent rating in 2004 and a 41 percent rating in 2005.
2. In June of 2004, the GOP enjoyed a nineteen-point lead in party identification (including leaners) over the Democrats among whites. This June, the *Democrats* actually have a small two-point lead in party identification among whites. That's a huge shift. Combined with the Democrats' current sixty-point lead in party identification among blacks and nineteen-point lead among Hispanics, that makes the GOP look quite vulnerable indeed.

After all, without white voters in essentially landslide proportions, the GOP political coalition, as we know it, could not exist. In fact, it wouldn't even be particularly competitive.

Something more for Karl Rove to worry about! And for pundits to opine about, if they can tear themselves away from telling the Democrats to panic about their dependence on the minority vote.

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:

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