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In this edition of *Public Opinion Watch*:

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Bush's Speech Fails to Stop His Slide in the Polls

On June 28, Bush delivered a primetime speech intended to pump up support for the Iraq war and, just as important, pump up his sliding overall poll numbers, which have been hurt severely by the continuing violence in Iraq.

It does not appear he succeeded. First, let's review where Bush was before the speech to get a sense of just how the steep the hill was he needed to climb and then we'll see how far he got up that hill. Here's an excerpt from [a USA Today story about a Gallup poll conducted on the eve of Bush's speech](#).

Just one in three Americans now say the United States and its allies are winning the war, according to a USA TODAY/CNN/Gallup Poll taken Friday through Sunday [June 24–26]. That is a new low, down 9 percentage points since February. Half say neither side is winning. . . .

By a record 61%-37%, those surveyed say the president doesn't have a clear plan for handling the situation in Iraq.

Bush's job-approval rating has suffered, too. His approval rating is 45%, equaling the

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lowest of his presidency. At 53%, his disapproval rating has reached a new high. . . .

51% want a timetable set and followed for removing troops from Iraq regardless of the situation there. There is also growing skepticism about the president's core argument that the Iraq war is a crucial part of protecting Americans from terrorists:

- For the first time, a plurality of Americans, by 50%–47%, sees the war in Iraq as a separate action from the war on terrorism.
- By 46%–43%, a plurality says the war in Iraq has made the U.S. less safe from terrorism.

By 53%–46%, Americans say the United States made a mistake in sending troops to Iraq. That's the highest level of discontent since the aftermath of the Abu Ghraib prison scandals last summer.

Quite a hill to climb! And that's just the Iraq issue. The same poll shows his approval rating on the economy at 41 percent approval/55 percent disapproval; on energy policy at 36 percent/53 percent; on health care policy at 34 percent/59 percent (his lowest ever); and on Social Security at 31 percent/64 percent (also his lowest Gallup rating ever). Even his rating on handling terrorism is mired in the mid-50s (currently it is 55 percent).

The Social Security data in the poll are particularly unfavorable for the administration. As the lead from [the Gallup report on these data](#) puts it:

The news for President George W. Bush on Social Security is not good. His approval ratings on Social Security are the worst they have been all year, and more Americans have faith in the Democrats than in the Republicans to deal with the issue. A majority of Americans continue to oppose private investment accounts—Bush's core idea for addressing the Social Security system. And while a majority of Americans acknowledge Bush has proposed a Social Security plan, fewer describe it as a clear plan.

[The latest ABC News/Washington Post poll](#), also released right before Bush's speech, underscored the depth of the challenge he faces on the Iraq issue. The ABC News report on the poll notes:

Recriminations against his administration have jumped, with a majority for the first time saying it "intentionally misled" the public in going to war, and nearly three-quarters saying it underestimated the challenges involved.

A record 57 percent also now say the administration intentionally exaggerated its evidence that pre-war Iraq possessed nuclear, chemical or biological weapons. Views such as these cut to the administration's basic credibility and competence, vital commodities as Bush tries to turn public opinion in a more favorable direction.

The report further notes some very interesting information about Bush's overall approval rating:

Bush's overall position isn't enviable. Not only do 51 percent of Americans disapprove of his job performance, a record 40 percent disapprove "strongly" (compared with 27 percent who strongly approve). *That exceeds career-high strong disapproval for his two immediate predecessors, President Clinton (33 percent strongly disapproved in fall 1994, shortly before his party lost control of Congress) and Bush's father (34 percent in summer 1992, shortly before he lost re-election).* [emphasis added]

In light of these data, given that Bush chose to give a speech that simply reiterated standard administration rationales for the Iraq occupation, did not address credibility issues and steadfastly refused to provide any specifics about how and when the administration would successfully conclude the occupation, it's hardly surprising that Bush failed to move the public opinion needle much in his favor.

Even [a Gallup flash poll of actual speech-watchers](#), who were heavily Republican (a twenty-seven-point Republican lead in party identification!), showed only modestly positive movement in Bush's direction on the war. And among the general public, there was very little movement at all. [The Gallup report on their post-speech national poll of adults](#) observes:

In his speech, the president presented his arguments for staying the course in Iraq, saying it was essential for U.S. security. But the poll suggests that he changed few people's minds on the issue. Some of the questions showed slightly more positive views of the war, but the differences between the public's views now and what Gallup measured on the weekend before Bush's speech are small and within the polls' margins of error.

Bush's overall approval rating barely budged either: it climbed all the way from 45 percent to 46 percent in the Gallup poll. And [a Zogby poll](#) conducted around the same time found Bush's approval rating *dropping* to 43 percent from 44 percent before the speech.

After the speech, the *Washington Post* carried [an interesting article by Peter Baker and Dan Balz](#) about the administration's apparent public opinion strategy. According to Baker and Balz, the administration has decided, buttressed by the academic work of two political scientists serving as advisors, Peter Feaver and Christopher Gelpi of Duke University, that the key thing is to shore up public confidence in *winning*, because that prospective belief is most important to maintaining support for the war effort.

Supposedly that's what the government did wrong during the Vietnam War—started showing doubt that the United States could actually win the war. The Bush administration apparently believes that simply by being resolute and uncompromising and betraying not the slightest scintilla of doubt about the war, past, present and future, that it can keep up public support and successfully bring the war to a conclusion.

Well, maybe. But even if it's true that public confidence in a war's winnability is key, it doesn't follow that simply *insisting* that the war is winnable and being won will convince the public that's so, in the face of actual facts on the ground that appear to contradict that assertion. That may be what the Bush administration wants to believe, but believing it doesn't make it true.

Moreover, if you read Feaver's and Gelpi's work a bit more carefully, it becomes clear that the Bush administration is deriving more comfort from their work than they should. Here's their basic thesis from their paper, "[Iraq the Vote: Retrospective and Prospective Foreign Policy Judgments, Candidate Choice, and Casualty Tolerance.](#)"

We show that prospective judgments of the likelihood of success in Iraq and retrospective judgments of whether the war in Iraq was right are significant determinants of both vote choice and casualty tolerance. The prospective judgment of success is key in predicting casualty tolerance, while *retrospective judgment of whether the war was right takes precedence in determining vote choice.* [emphasis added]

In plain English, that means that, leaving aside the question of supporting the ongoing war effort, if people conclude the war was wrong and a bad idea to begin with, they want to vote against the party behind the war. What are people concluding right now? That the war was wrong and a bad idea. Uh-oh! Someone better call Karl Rove and let him in on the bad news.

Youth Say: Bad Bush, No Biscuit!

Greenberg Quinlan Rosner (GQR), in conjunction with internet survey firm Polimetrix, is conducting a "Youth Monitor" series of surveys of 18–25 year olds. [The first survey in the series](#) has just been released and it suggests that youth, as they showed in the 2004 election, are very much *not* with the Bush program.

According to the poll, youth give Bush a strongly net negative approval rating—42 percent approval, with 58 percent disapproval, for a –16 net. Even more tellingly, youth hold the following views: by 63 percent to 37 percent, they feel that the war in Iraq has *not* been worth the cost in U.S. lives and dollars; by 65 percent to 33 percent, they believe that the Democrats, not the Republicans, do a better job representing the interests of young people; by 64 percent to 36 percent, they think that Bush and the Republicans "are going too far by invading peoples' personal lives and family decisions," rather than "are doing a good job in trying to uphold moral values and protecting families"; by 58 percent to 42 percent, they believe we need to work harder at tolerating people who are different, particularly gays, rather than work harder at upholding traditional values and strong families; and, last but not least, by 57 percent to 43 percent, they think that Bush has *not* made us safer from terrorist attack.

By these data, the Democrats should replicate their recent strong performance among young voters in 2006 and perhaps beyond.

Sure, Hispanics Are Important, But You've Still Got to Do Most of Your Hunting Where Most of the Ducks Are

The Pew Hispanic Center has just released a very useful, data-rich report, "[Hispanics and the 2004 Election: Population, Electorate and Voters.](#)" Among other things, the report

concludes, **as I have**, that the 58 percent to 40 percent Kerry–Bush split among Hispanics in the combined state exit polls is much more plausible than the 53 percent to 44 percent split in the national exit poll. To support this view, they note that the demographics of the Hispanic voter sample in the combined state polls matches up well with the demographics of the 2004 Census Voter Supplement Hispanic sample. The demographics of the national exit poll Hispanic sample, on the other hand, match up rather poorly with the Census data. (For an explanation of what the Census Voter Supplement data is and why we should take its demographic information quite seriously, see **[my recent comments on the release of the 2004 Voter Supplement data.](#)**)

The report also notes that all of the shift toward Bush among Hispanics from 2000 to 2004 occurred among Protestants. Hispanic Catholics didn't waver in their Democratic loyalties.

The focus of the report, however, is not on partisan Hispanic voting patterns, but rather the Hispanic vote as a whole and how rapidly it is growing. Their answer, in brief, is: not as rapidly as you think, especially in comparison to the overall growth of the Hispanic population. Here are their key findings:

Between the 2000 and 2004 elections, the Hispanic population grew by 5.7 million, accounting for half of the increase in the U.S. population of 11.5 million.

Of those 5.7 million Hispanics added to the U.S. population between the last two presidential elections, 1.7 million persons or 30 percent were less than 18 years old and are thus not eligible to vote. Another 1.9 million or 33 percent of the people added to the Hispanic population between the two elections were adults not eligible to vote because they were not citizens.

As a result of these factors, only 39 percent of the Latino population was eligible to vote compared to 76 percent of whites and 65 percent of the black population.

Both the number of Latinos registered to vote (9.3 million) and the number of Latinos who cast ballots (7.6 million) in November 2004 marked increases of political participation over the 2000 election that were larger than for any other ethnic or racial group in percentage terms.

However, both registration and turnout rates for Latinos were lower than for whites or blacks. As a result, only 47 percent of eligible Hispanics went to the polls compared to 67 percent of whites and 60 percent of blacks. Differences in registration rates explain most of the gaps.

The combination of demographic factors and participation rates meant that only 18 percent of the Latino population voted in 2004 compared to 51 percent of whites and 39 percent of blacks.

In November 2004, Hispanics were 14.3 percent of the total population but only 6.0 percent of the votes cast. In the previous election, Hispanics were 12.8 percent of the population and 5.5 percent of the votes cast.

These interesting data serve to remind us of an important fact. While the Hispanic population is indeed growing fast, the Hispanic vote still lags far, far behind the white vote in terms of political importance and that is not going to change anytime soon. Therefore, even if the Hispanic vote turns back towards the Democrats in the 2006 and 2008 elections, **as I believe is likely**, the Democrats will not make much progress without moving the white vote, particularly the white working class vote, away from the Republicans.

Indeed, it would greatly serve GOP interests for Democrats to focus their worries and energies on the Hispanic vote, while conceding GOP dominance over the white vote. That's still where most of the ducks are and where most of the Democratic hunting should be, if they hope to break the GOP hold on Congress and the Presidency.

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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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