

# THE CENTURY FOUNDATION

## public opinion watch

by ruy teixeira

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(Covering polls and related articles from the week of February 21–27, 2005.)

In this edition of *Public Opinion Watch*:

**Bush's Approval Ratings Decline as Support for His Social Security Plan Heads South**

**Where Have All the Southern White Moderates Gone? Outside of a Small Circle of Friends**

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### **Bush's Approval Ratings Decline as Support for His Social Security Plan Heads South**

[Princeton Survey Research poll of 1,502 adults for Pew Research Center](#), released February 24, 2005 (conducted February 16–21, 2005)

[Public Opinion Strategies/Greenberg Quinlan Rosner Research poll of 800 likely voters for NPR](#), released February 26, 2005 (conducted February 15–17, 2005)

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The latest Pew Research Center poll finds Bush's approval ratings headed downward. In the poll, Bush's overall approval rating is now 46 percent approval/47 percent disapproval, compared to 50 percent/43 percent in January. His approval ratings on Iraq (from 45 percent/50 percent to 40 percent/53 percent) and on foreign policy (from 48 percent/43 percent to 43 percent/46 percent) have fallen even further over the same period. And even his approval rating on handling terrorist threats has declined from 62 percent to 59 percent.

The Pew poll also shows that, despite a recent uptick in optimism about prospects for stability in Iraq, support for the Iraq war itself is declining. The public is now split, 47 percent to 47 percent, on whether using military force against Iraq was the right decision or wrong decision, the most

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negative reading ever on this poll question by Pew. Moreover, independents now believe that using military force was the wrong decision by 53 percent to 42 percent, the most negative reading yet among this particular group.

As for whether Bush has a clear plan to bring the Iraq situation to a successful conclusion, just 32 percent now believe that he does, compared to 61 percent who think he does not. That is also the most negative result ever on this particular question. It would appear that the Iraqi elections, despite favorable initial reaction, have not fundamentally altered dubious public views of the Iraq situation.

The latest NPR poll provides the most recent evidence that Bush's efforts to build support for his Social Security plan have been singularly ineffective. In this poll, despite findings that indicate that Bush has a more favorable image than the GOP as a whole on approaching Social Security issues, an unaided question that simply refers to "President Bush's proposed changes to Social Security" gets a very negative response: Only 30 percent say that they favor his proposed changes, compared to 53 percent who say that they oppose them. Moreover, only 13 percent strongly support these changes, while almost three times as many (38 percent) strongly oppose them.

Additional questions in the poll show that opposition is still high when respondents are given some details about Bush's plan. When referred to as Bush's "proposal to create voluntary Personal Retirement Accounts as part of the Social Security system," opposition is 49 percent to 41 percent. And when referred to as Bush's "proposal to privatize Social Security and divert part of the Social Security system into private accounts," opposition is a sharper 58 percent to 34 percent.

Thus, no matter whether Bush's plan is referred to with his preferred language or with that preferred by Democrats, the result is still opposition. This suggests the degree to which Bush's persuasive efforts are hitting a brick wall.

### **Where Have All the Southern White Moderates Gone?**

In 1996, Clinton split the southern vote, 46 percent to 46 percent, with Bob Dole. One of the keys to his strong performance was this: he actually *carried* southern white moderates by 46 percent to 44 percent.

In 2004, however, Kerry got beaten by fifteen points in the south (57 percent to 42 percent). So where have all the southern white moderates gone?

In a sense, nowhere. The ideological profile of the southern electorate has barely changed since 1996: it was 17 percent liberal/44 percent moderate/39 conservative then; it is 17 percent liberal/43 percent moderate/40 percent conservative now. And among whites, the ideological profile was 15 percent liberal/43 percent moderate/43 percent conservative in 1996; it is 14 percent liberal/41 percent moderate/45 percent conservative now.

Not much change. But what has changed is a big swing from Clinton's 46 percent to 44 percent support among southern white moderates in 1996 to Kerry's 58 percent to 41 percent deficit among the same voting group, whose size and electoral weight remains as potent as ever, in 2004.

There's your target. Move southern white moderates back toward parity and the Democrats are back in the (southern) ballgame.

### **Outside of a Small Circle of Friends**

A small circle of friends—that's about the limit of support for Bush's basic approach to Social Security "reform." **A new Gallup analysis** shows that, outside of paid-up members of the Republican base, almost no subgroups of the electorate support Bush's approach and most are outright hostile.

Here's the question that Gallup bases its analysis on:

As you may know, one idea to address concerns with the Social Security system would allow people who retire in future decades to invest some of their Social Security taxes in the stock market and bonds, but would reduce the guaranteed benefits they get when they retire. Do you think this is a good idea or a bad idea?

A pretty fair summation, I think, of Bush's approach. And here's Gallup on what people say when asked this:

About 4 in 10 Americans have consistently said that such a proposal is a "good idea," while slightly fewer than 6 in 10 have said it is a "bad idea." An analysis of support for the reform proposal by subgroup—based on an aggregate of the three polls in which the question was asked—reveals that few subgroups endorse it. Republicans and conservatives are most likely to express support, and younger Americans are more likely than older Americans to favor this reform approach. The data suggest the president would have a lot of work to do to convince others to support such a proposal.

Indeed. The data adduced in the rest of the analysis include the following levels of opposition to Bush's approach: 61 percent to 34 percent among independents; 65 percent to 31 percent among moderates; 55 percent to 41 percent among those thirty to forty-nine years old; 63 percent to 33 percent among those aged fifty-five to sixty-four; and 64 percent to 31 percent among those age sixty-five or older.

In addition, just 40 percent of whites support Bush's proposal and every income group opposes it save those with \$100,000 or more in income. And even these affluent respondents only support it narrowly, 51 percent to 47 percent.

As the Gallup analysis concludes: "At this stage, it looks as if there is little initial support for the proposal outside of Bush's most reliable supporters." That's the simple truth of the matter, no matter what the administration shells keep on saying.

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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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