

THE CENTURY FOUNDATION

public opinion watch

by ruy teixeira

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(Covering polls and related articles from the week of February 28–March 6, 2005.)

In this edition of *Public Opinion Watch*:

Unpopular from Coast to Coast
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Unpopular from Coast to Coast

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

Zogby poll of 1,010 likely voters, released February 27, 2005 (conducted February 25–27, 2005)

Princeton Survey Research poll of 1,502 adults for Pew Research Center, released March 2, 2005 (conducted February 16–21, 2005)

CBS News/*New York Times* poll of 1,111 adults, released March 3, 2005 (conducted February 24–28, 2005)

There's been a rather remarkable string of polling data released in the last ten days or so detailing how public opinion is turning against Bush and, particularly, his proposal to privatize Social Security. A second term that was to have been turbocharged by the Iraq elections and his grandiloquent inauguration and State of the Union speeches seems to have gone sour more quickly than his opponents dared hope.

A Zogby poll released on February 27 included the following dreadful job approval numbers for Bush: 46 percent overall, 44 percent on taxes, 40 percent on foreign policy, 39 percent on the Iraq war, 37 percent on jobs/economy, 37 percent on education, and 32 percent on the environment. He only cracks 50 percent on one issue: the war on terror (54 percent). In addition, this poll found only 39 percent saying that the Iraq war was worth the cost, compared to 54 percent saying that it wasn't worth the cost.

Then there was the NPR poll that I wrote about in [last week's Public Opinion Watch](#). In that poll, voters said that they opposed Bush's "proposed changes to Social Security" 53 percent to 30 percent, bad enough on the face of it. But [subsequently released charts of the poll data](#) make the situation seem even more dire for Bush.

To begin with, the more familiar people were with Bush's Social Security plan, the more likely they were to say they opposed it, including 64 percent to 31 percent opposition among those who were "very familiar." Even worse, voters living in counties carried by Bush in 2004 actually said that they opposed his plan 49 percent to 34 percent. And changing the wording of the question to Republican-leaning language resulted only in a split 45 percent to 45 percent verdict among Bush county voters, while Democratic-leaning language elicited solid 53 percent to 39 percent opposition among these same voters.

Those numbers suggest just how difficult the situation is getting for Bush on this particular issue. Bush's troubles are underscored by the latest Pew Research Center poll, which also documents considerable slippage for Bush in other areas. Here's the lead of Pew's report on the poll:

President George W. Bush is losing ground with the public in his efforts to build support for private retirement accounts in Social Security. Despite Bush's intensive campaign to promote the idea, the percentage of Americans who say they favor private accounts has tumbled to 46% in Pew's latest nationwide survey, down from 54% in December and 58% in September. Support has declined as the public has become increasingly aware of the president's plan. More than four-in-ten (43%) say they have heard a lot about the proposal, nearly double the number who said that in December (23%).

The new poll indicates that the Social Security debate is packing a powerful political punch. It finds that just 29% of Americans approve of the way that Bush is handling the issue. This is the president's lowest approval rating for any policy area, and is considerably lower than his overall job approval rating of 46%. Moreover, by a 65%–25% margin, most say the president has not explained his Social Security proposal clearly enough.

Further, the public expresses much more confidence on this issue in the AARP, which is strongly opposed to private accounts, than they do in the president or in Republican congressional leaders.

Ouch! That's gotta hurt down at the White House and RNC headquarters. It looks like Bush's efforts on Social Security are only succeeding in diminishing support for his own proposal and lowering his approval rating in that area. Not only that, his unsuccessful efforts are probably helping drag down all his other ratings besides. Confirming the pattern seen in the Zogby poll, only his approval rating on "terrorist threats" (59 percent) cracks 50 percent, while every other job rating in a specific area is 44 percent or less: education (44 percent), foreign policy (43 percent), the economy (43 percent), the environment (42 percent), the budget deficit (41 percent), the Iraq situation (40 percent), health care (36 percent), and, of course, that abysmal 29 percent (22 percent among independents), with 55 percent disapproval, on Social Security.

Bad as these polls are for Bush, perhaps the bleakest news for him is in the just-released CBS News/*New York Times* poll. Here are the key findings:

1. Bush's overall approval rating is 49 percent, his rating on Iraq is 45 percent, and his rating on foreign policy is 44 percent. Bad, but par for the course for Bush these days. More startling, this poll has his approval rating on the economy down to 38 percent, with 54 percent disapproval. That's only a couple of points above his worst rating in this poll, indicating that the public may be losing patience with the continued failure of the Bush recovery to generate robust growth. And Bush's approval rating on the federal budget deficit is a miserable 29 percent, with 60 percent disapproval.
2. The poll asked respondents whether they thought that Bush had the same or different priorities as most Americans on two different types of issues. On foreign policy issues, 58 percent thought that he had different priorities and only 37 percent thought that he had the same priorities. And on domestic issues, the verdict was a substantially more negative 63 percent different/31 percent same. And we are supposed to believe that Bush is somehow in tune with the American people, even if his party is not? Not by the evidence of this poll.
3. Slightly more people say that they are uneasy with Bush's ability to handle an international crisis than say they are confident (51 percent to 47 percent)—hardly a ringing endorsement. But that looks robust compared to 63 percent uneasy/31 percent confident judgement on Bush's ability to make the right decisions on Social Security.
4. On abortion and legal recognition of gay or same sex couples, people say that the Democrats are closer to their views than the Republicans by margins of five to ten points. And Democrats are favored by seventeen points (48 percent to 31 percent) as the party more likely to make the right decisions about Social Security.
5. The poll asked:

Some people have suggested allowing 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. Do you think allowing individuals to invest a portion of their Social Security taxes on their own is a good idea or a bad idea?

That wording returned a 51 percent bad idea/43 percent good idea judgement—the most negative response yet on this question, which was first asked in May, 2000. Moreover, consistent with other recent polls, the question has been following a downward trajectory as Bush has pushed his privatization proposal to the fore.

Followup questions reduce the number saying individual accounts are a good idea to 22 percent, if guaranteed benefits are cut, and to 17 percent, if the accounts would increase the federal budget deficit.

6. The public overwhelmingly believes that individual accounts would not have a positive impact on Social Security's financial situation. Only 19 percent believe that such accounts would make Social Security's financial situation better, while 69 percent believe that it would either make it worse (45 percent) or have no impact (24 percent).
7. Currently, 50 percent believe that the United States should have stayed out of Iraq, compared to 46 percent who believe that the United States did the right thing in taking military action. That's only the second time the "stay out" figure has broken 50 percent—more evidence that the failure of the Iraqi elections to substantially change the facts on the ground in Iraq is feeding into a jaundiced view of the U.S. intervention. And people are actually *less* convinced now than they were before the November election that Bush has a clear plan for dealing with the Iraq situation (71 percent now believe he doesn't, while only 21 percent believe he does).
8. Bush is continuing his long-term work of alienating the political center. That didn't quite kill him in 2004, but this trend can't be good for the GOP's future prospects and the hopes they harbor of creating a new political majority.

In this poll, Bush's overall approval rating among independents is 42 percent. Among the same group, his rating on Iraq is 42 percent; on foreign policy, 40 percent; on the economy, 33 percent; and on the federal budget deficit, 23 percent.

And on Social Security, it is extraordinary how close the views of Democrats and independents are on most key issues and how far apart both are from Republicans. Bush is completely losing the battle for the middle on this one.

For example, independents reject private accounts by 56 percent to 37 percent, fairly close to the 63 percent to 31 percent opposition among Democrats. But Republicans support them by 65 percent to 28 percent, a huge gap. Similarly, just 14 percent of independents and of Democrats think that individual accounts would be a good idea, even if guaranteed benefits were cut, while almost three times as many Republicans (40 percent) think so.

While Bush did just manage to squeak by in 2004, despite the many ways he alienated the political center, he and his party are likely to pay a considerable price for this approach as the Social Security struggle unfolds and we move toward 2006 and 2008.

Military Voters, Black Voters, Hispanic Voters

Peter Beinart argues in his op-ed "[A Democratic Call to Arms](#)" in last Sunday's *Washington Post* that Democrats must make big progress among military voters to counter the Republicans' big success among black and Hispanic voters. As Beinart puts it:

Republicans have been conquering their demographic challenge, while Democrats have not. Between 2000 and 2004, George W. Bush increased his share of African American votes from 9 percent to 11 percent. . . . Among Hispanics, Bush's total rose from 35

percent to as much as 44 percent. But despite widespread talk about military disaffection over Iraq, John Kerry won only 41 percent of Americans with military experience.

I think it's a fine idea for Democrats to increase their share of the military vote—but not because they need to match big Republican gains among blacks and Hispanics. Indeed, the idea that, based on the last election, Republicans have somehow conquered “their demographic challenge” is absurd.

In terms of the black vote, Kerry's 88 percent to 11 percent margin is the highest obtained by a Democratic candidate since the exit polls started in 1976, except for 2000 and Mondale's 1984 campaign. To say that the 2004 result represents a breakthrough for the Republicans is ridiculous.

In terms of the Hispanic vote, if Bush had really gotten 44 percent of the Hispanic vote, that would represent some kind of a breakthrough. **But he almost certainly did not.** The 44 percent figure Beinart alludes to is the NEP national exit poll figure which has more or less been repudiated by the exit pollsters themselves, **due to sampling problems in the 2004 poll.** The best exit poll figure for the Hispanic vote at this point is 40 percent, based on aggregating all the state exit polls. And there are good reasons for thinking that the true figure may actually be closer to 39 percent.

So, by all means, go after the military voters. But Democrats should go after them not out of desperation (Help! We're losing blacks and Hispanics!), but because it's a good idea in its own right.

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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: www.tcf.org.