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(Covering polls and related articles from the week of May 2–8, 2005.)

In this edition of Public Opinion Watch:

Has Bush Turned the Corner?

Once Again on the White Working Class

Once Again on Party Identification and Likely Voters

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Has Bush Turned the Corner?

Did Bush thrill the nation with his bold proposals in his April 28 press conference and thereby turn around his flagging political fortunes?

Not on the evidence of the first two public polls released after the press conference. Consider first the results of **[the April 29-May 1 Gallup poll](#)**.

1. The poll found Bush's overall approval rating unchanged from Gallup's previous poll at 48 percent approval/49 percent disapproval. His rating on Social Security was also essentially unchanged at 35 percent/58 percent. His rating on the economy was up slightly to 43 percent/53 percent and his rating on Iraq was down slightly to 42 percent/55 percent.

His ratings on energy policy (34 percent/52 percent) and gas prices (27 percent/67 percent) brought up the rear.
2. On Social Security, the Gallup data show that people are still not chafing at the bit for immediate action on Social Security. A majority (52 percent) feel that major changes are necessary only within ten years (36 percent) or not at all (16 percent), rather than in the next year or two (45 percent). Moreover, only 27 percent say that Congress should pass the Social Security plan most Republicans support this year, compared to 66 percent who say that Congress should either pass a Democratic plan (22 percent) or not

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pass a plan at all this year (46 percent).

A generic question about private accounts that neither mentions Bush nor any possible tradeoffs of such accounts—thereby tending to produce a relatively positive response—nevertheless generates 52 percent to 45 percent opposition, worse than the 47 percent to 45 percent opposition in the middle of March, near the beginning of Bush's sixty-day Social Security tour.

And Bush's specific proposal for cutting benefits for the middle and upper class, but not the poor, receives 54 percent to 38 percent opposition, similar to the 53 percent to 38 percent majority that believes Bush's Social Security proposals will cut, rather than protect, their Social Security benefits.

Finally, at the end of Bush's sixty-day tour, the public continues to trust the Democratic party over the Republican party on the issue of Social Security retirement benefits. A ten-point gap in favor of the Democrats has not budged over that time period.

3. On Iraq, 57 percent now believe going to war was not worth it, compared to 41 percent who believe it was. That's the most negative response Gallup has yet received on this indicator.
4. On the filibuster issue, the public backs the use of the filibuster in the Senate by 52 percent to 40 percent. And they say they back the Democrats over the Republicans in the Senate by 45 percent to 36 percent on this issue.

The news for Bush in [the new Hotline/Westhill Partners poll](#) is, if anything, even worse.

1. Bush's overall approval rating (48 percent/48 percent) is up slightly, as is his rating on Social Security (all the way to 34 percent/56 percent!); his rating on the economy is down slightly (to 38 percent/57 percent) and his rating on Iraq (41 percent/52 percent) is essentially unchanged.
2. On Social Security, the poll asked respondents how Bush's proposed changes to Social Security made them feel about their financial security after retirement. Only 9 percent say that they feel more secure than a year ago, compared to 39 percent who say that they feel *less* secure and 28 percent who report no change.

I suppose that's not quite the reaction Bush was looking for.

3. On the economy, there is some particularly bad news for Bush and the GOP. Just 9 percent think that most American families are better off financially now than they were a year ago, while half—more than five times as many—believe American families are not as well off. As for their own family, only 19 percent think their family is better off today than it was a year ago, compared to 28 percent who think their family is not as well off and about half (51 percent) who think there's been no change.

Moreover, over half (51 percent) say that they will hold Bush (37 percent) or the

Republicans in Congress (14 percent) responsible, rather than the Democrats (14 percent), if the economy remains shaky.

4. On the filibuster, by 53 percent to 32 percent, voters say that they disapprove of changing Senate rules to take away the filibuster and allow Bush's judicial nominees to be voted on. And, by 46 percent to 35 percent, voters approve of the proposed Senate Democratic slowdown if the filibuster is taken away.

Turning the corner? Sounds more like running into a brick wall to me.

Once Again on the White Working Class

In an item in the February 16 *Public Opinion Watch*, "[It's the White Working Class, Stupid](#)," I argued that poor performance among white working class voters cost the Democrats the 2004 election. I cited the startling finding from the 2004 National Election Pool (NEP) exit poll that Democrats lost white working class voters by twenty-three points to buttress my case, a finding that has been widely cited in subsequent discussions of Democrats' problems.

In that analysis, I defined the white working class as whites without a four-year college degree, a definition that [Chris Bowers of MyDD has questioned in a recent post on that blog](#).

For the record, here is why I use an education-based definition of the white working class, as originally set forth in my book with Joel Rogers, *America's Forgotten Majority: Why the White Working Class Still Matters*:

It is this Great Divide [between the college-educated and non-college-educated] that defines the new white working class. On one side of the Great Divide, lacking a four-year college degree, are the vast majority—three-quarters—of white adults, who have not fared well over the last quarter-century. On the other side, are the quarter of white adults who have a four year degree or more and for whom the last 25 years have been a time of substantial economic progress.

Of course, these non-college educated whites are "not your father's" white working class. Instead of blue collar work, this new white working class is more likely to be doing low-level white collar and service work. And instead of working in manufacturing, the new white working class is much more likely to work in an office with a computer or at similar service sector jobs. They are also likely to have more education; perhaps some years in college, maybe even an A.A. degree and those in the workforce are much more likely to be female. *But, in economic terms, they are not so different from the white working class of previous generations. . . .*

Besides the very tangible reality of the Great Divide, there are other good reasons to define the white working class in this way. Education data is almost always collected with political surveys and the educational categories used are usually commensurate across surveys. Moreover, education data are typically collected on all survey respondents, not just those who currently hold a job, so it is possible to categorize all

individuals in the survey.

Occupation data, on the other hand, though tapping more directly the traditional definition of working class, are frequently not collected on political surveys. And when it is, the categories used vary wildly and typically leave out those not holding a job, or even all those not holding a full-time job.

Income data are more commonly collected on political surveys. However, the data collected is usually categorical and these categories vary substantially across surveys. And then there is the problem of inflation, which makes comparison of categorical income data from different time periods very problematic.

For these reasons, I will stick with an education-based definition of the white working class for the time being. However, it's worth asking what Democratic performance in 2004 looks like when we add income to education for a more fine-grained consideration of white working class voting, as the exit poll data do permit (occupation, as mentioned above, cannot be looked at with exit poll data).

Here is what you find: those voters who seem to correspond most closely to one's intuitive sense of the heart of the white working class—that is, white voters who have a modest income *and* are non-college-educated—are precisely the voters among whom Democrats did most poorly.

For example, among non-college-educated whites with \$30,000–\$50,000 in household income, Bush beat Kerry by twenty-four points (62 percent to 38 percent); among college-educated whites at the same income level, Kerry actually managed a 49 percent to 49 percent tie. And among non-college-educated whites with \$50,000–\$75,000 in household income, Bush beat Kerry by a shocking forty-one points (70 percent to 29 percent), while leading by only five points (52 percent to 47 percent) among college-educated whites at the same income level.

Conclusion: the more voters looked like hardcore members of the white working class, the less likely they were to vote for Kerry in the 2004 election. That's a problem—a *big* problem—that Democrats have to take quite seriously if they wish to win.

Once Again on Party Identification and Likely Voters

We've all had a chance to calm down since the polling controversies of the 2004 campaign. Where do we stand now on the two biggest ones: party identification/party identification weighting and likely voter screens/models?

Party Identification

The wild swings in party identification (ID) during the 2004 election campaign, particularly the huge Republican advantages that started showing up in some polls, were defended by Gallup and other pollsters as just reflecting actual changes in party ID as the campaign evolved. They took vindication from the exit poll results that showed an even distribution of party identification, rather than the four-point Democratic advantage four years earlier.

But it doesn't follow that, if there was a shift toward parity in party identification (leaving aside the turnout issue) in the 2004 campaign, that therefore the Republican advantages of six to ten points or more we were seeing at some points during the campaign were real. Those still seem quite out of line, indicating levels of party ID movement among voters in short periods of the campaign that just don't seem plausible.

The idea that sample bias couldn't possibly have been a factor in some of those outlandish 2004 campaign results seems especially questionable in light of the fact that the NEP exit pollsters—paid-up members of the polling establishment—now maintain that the Kerry bias in their own poll stemmed from differential willingness to be interviewed on the part of Kerry and Bush voters. This is the same dynamic—differential willingness to be interviewed by a highly politically consequential variable—that myself, Alan Abramowitz, and others thought could be causing some of the skewed samples during the election campaign.

Indeed, if the NEP pollsters are right, perhaps we had the mechanism slightly wrong on the pre-election polls: instead of differential willingness to be interviewed by partisanship, it was, more simply, differential willingness to be interviewed by Bush supporters and Kerry supporters. Such a differential could easily produce the sudden partisan skews we saw in some of these samples.

On party ID weighting, if sample bias has been and is a problem and all the party identification shifts we see aren't completely driven by actual shifts in public sentiment (plus random sampling error), then there is still a case for party weighting. Weighting by the exit poll distribution is certainly a blunt instrument and I wouldn't advocate it as a matter of course. But "dynamic party ID weighting" continues to be a very defensible idea.

The idea here, associated with political analyst Charlie Cook, is that polls should weight their samples by a rolling average of their unweighted party identification numbers taken over the previous several months. This would allow the distribution of party identification to change some over time, but eliminate the effects of sudden spikes in partisan identifiers in samples such as we saw during the 2004 campaign (**and still see from time to time now in both partisan directions**; there have been polls recently that have seemed implausibly Democratic, as well as those that have seemed implausibly Republican).

Pollsters don't want to do this? Want to maintain there's absolutely nothing wrong? Fine—just give the public the data needed to form independent judgements of their polls and conduct independent analyses (e.g., computing and applying dynamic party ID weights) if they wish to. **Mark Blumenthal's series on party ID disclosure by major pollsters** is instructive. There is clearly progress here, but still considerable resistance. It's still hard to find these data, even by pollsters (like Gallup) who say they are making it publicly available. Sure, if you read *The Hotline*, you can now get the party identification breakdown of nearly every poll (though that's about it in terms of data about the poll sample). But very few people have access to *The Hotline*.

There is no reason why every pollster couldn't fully disclose on a Web page somewhere on a public site: party ID and demographic distributions of both weighted and unweighted samples for every poll they do and for every type of sample they have: general public, registered voters

(RVs), likely voters (LVs), etc. They have the information: let it free.

Likely Voters

LV samples appeared to do better than RV samples when predicting the election results right before the election. They should have; that's what they were designed for. But it doesn't follow that therefore, say, Gallup was fully justified in using tightly screened LV samples, with their very volatile results, weeks and in fact many months before the actual election. **As academic analyses and common sense suggest**, political movement indicated by such LV results tends to be mostly driven by voters moving in and out of the LV samples in the weeks and months before the election, rather than by actual changes in voter sentiment. But Gallup's LV results were shamelessly promoted during the 2004 campaign as indicating just that: real changes in voter sentiment. That's not right and is a corruption of what LV models and samples were originally developed for—predicting the results of the election, right before the election.

It's also worth noting that elaborate, tight LV screens like Gallup's, that have the most volatility, didn't do much better than weak LV screens in predicting the actual election outcome in the days before the election (**see these data collected by Mark Blumenthal**, keeping in mind that the final Bush–Kerry margin was about 2.45 percentage points, not the 2.9 points indicated in his post). So there wasn't even that much of a payoff for their methodology there.

Pollsters don't want to change their methodologies? That's their prerogative, however much I may disagree with them. But they clearly should, at a minimum, publicly release their screening questions and methodologies and full results and demographic breakdowns of results from their screening questions, as well as the information called for above on the composition of the samples they produce by their pet methodologies.

In general on both the party identification and likely voter controversies: pollsters may not agree with the criticisms I and others have made, but by God there's no convincing reason why they can't release the sample data I outline above on a regular basis. Full disclosure, full disclosure, full disclosure! What are they afraid of?

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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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