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Democratic Potential among White Working Class Voters

I've written quite a bit lately about [Democratic woes among white working class voters](#). Clearly, Democrats can't get very far without substantially improving their performance among these voters. But Democrats have reason for hope. Two recent reports demonstrate there is considerable potential for Democratic inroads among large segments of the white working class.

The first report is a recent cover story in *Business Week*, "[Safety Net Nation](#)." As the story points out:

The most predictable members of Safety Net Nation are liberals who favor activist government. The really crucial bloc, however, is made up of those who backed Bush in 2004. They still approve of his overall job performance but have soured on Wall Street and dislike the President's approach to Social Security. This faction—estimates range from 17% to 22% of the electorate—rejects both traditional liberalism and conservative laissez-faire. In an era of rampant job insecurity, when employer-provided pensions and health coverage can no longer be taken for granted, they want a middle-class security blanket that gives them protection as they build wealth.

The story terms those Bush-backers who now think he's gone off the rails on Social Security as "Safety Net swing voters." And it is apparent from data provided with the story that these swing

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voters are primarily working class whites (especially men). I have flagged the potential for Bush's Social Security plan to alienate Republican-leaning white working class voters (or **"Sam's Club Republicans," as Reihan Salam likes to call them**) before and this is more evidence of the same.

The second report of interest is **the new Pew Research Center 2005 Political Typology survey**. This is a moose of a report and, while I generally don't care too much for elaborate attitudinal typologies of voters such as the one used in this report, it still contains much useful data.

For our purposes, the most interesting two groups in their typology are "Pro-Government Conservatives" (PGCs) and "Disaffecteds."

The PGCs, classified as a Republican base group, are 10 percent of voters. They are 85 percent white, 85 percent non-college-educated, 90 percent with incomes below \$75,000, and 62 percent women. The Disaffecteds, classified as a middle group (though they leaned strongly toward Bush in the last election) are also 10 percent of voters. They are 81 percent white, 89 percent non-college-educated, 87 percent with incomes below \$75,000, and 57 percent men.

So both groups are clearly dominated by working class whites, though the PGCs are heavy on working class white women and the Disaffecteds on working class white men. And both of these white working class groups show considerable sympathy for Democratic approaches according to the Pew data. Here are a few of the most relevant data points:

1. PGCs favor a government guarantee of health insurance for all, even if it means raising taxes, by 63 percent to 33 percent, and Disaffecteds favor such a guarantee by 64 percent to 26 percent. The most economically conservative group in the GOP coalition, the "Enterprisers" (which is dominated by affluent, educated white men), opposes such a guarantee by 76 percent to 23 percent.
2. PGCs favor raising the minimum wage, 94 percent to 5 percent, and Disaffecteds favor it by 84 percent to 13 percent.
3. PGCs, by 58 percent to 27 percent, want Bush's tax cuts either repealed completely or repealed for the wealthy, rather than made permanent and Disaffecteds endorse the same viewpoint by 51 percent to 33 percent. Enterprisers, on the other hand, support making the tax cuts permanent by 82 percent to 13 percent.
4. PGCs believe, by 80 percent to 13 percent, that "government should do more to help needy Americans even it means going deeper into debt." They also believe, by 83 percent to 11 percent, that too much power is concentrated in the hands of few large companies and, by 66 percent to 27 percent, that government regulation of business is necessary to protect the public interest. Finally, the PGCs believe, by 61 percent to 32 percent, that stricter environmental regulations are worth the costs, rather than that such regulations cost too many jobs and hurt the economy. (Note: no data available on these questions for Disaffecteds.)

5. Both PGCs (47 percent to 46 percent) and Disaffecteds (53 percent to 31 percent) put a higher priority on moving stem cell research forward than on not destroying potential life in human embryos.
6. Both PGCs (71 percent to 22 percent) and Disaffecteds (78 percent to 13 percent) overwhelmingly endorse the idea that outsourcing is bad for the economy because of its effect on jobs, rather than good for the economy because it keeps costs down.
7. The Pew report puts a great deal of emphasis on the centrality of national security issues in determining who leans Democratic and who leans Republican. Indeed, the report asserts:

Foreign affairs assertiveness now almost completely distinguishes Republican-oriented voters from Democratic-oriented voters; this was a relatively minor factor in past typologies. In contrast, attitudes relating to religion and social issues are not nearly as important in determining party affiliation.

In light of this argument, it's interesting to note that PGCs and Disaffecteds do depart from the Republican-leaning consensus on some foreign policy issues. For example, Disaffecteds believe that the best way to ensure peace is through good diplomacy, rather than military force (49 percent to 38 percent) and that relying too much on force creates hatred and more terrorism, rather than that military force is the best way to defeat terrorism (47 percent to 38 percent). And PGCs think, by 50 percent to 40 percent, that U.S. foreign policy should account for allies' interests, even if that entails compromise, rather than follow national interests even when allies disagree.

Of course, none of this means that white working class voters in these two groups will be an easy "get" for the Democrats. The Pew report provides abundant data on various pressures pushing these voters in the GOP direction.

Nor does it mean that simply invoking some of the issues on which these groups agree with Democrats will produce an automatic harvest of white working class votes. **As Ralph Whitehead points out**, reaching these voters is a great deal more complicated than that.

But it does indicate a serious opening for Democratic appeals among these voters. And it is important to stress that such appeals need not eliminate the GOP advantage among white working class voters or even come close. All that is necessary is to reduce their current landslide levels of dominance among these voters to dominance that is not quite so lopsided.

Keep in mind that Bill Clinton actually *carried* white working class voters in both his successful presidential campaign (by a single percentage point in both instances). But Democrats need not replicate that performance. *If Democrats can simply keep the Republican margin among white working class voters to the low double digits (say eleven to twelve points), and maintain their margins from 2004 among college-educated whites and among minority groups (note that I assume no improvement from 2004 in the Democratic performance among Hispanics, though I strongly believe that is likely to happen), my estimates indicate that the Democrats will win the*

2008 presidential popular vote by three points.

And if the Democrats can keep the Republican margin among working class whites to single digits? It's lights out, GOP.

Political Capital? What Political Capital?

According to the latest Gallup poll, the **"Public Mood Remains Dour."** Here's the lead paragraph from their report on the poll.

The latest Gallup survey finds the public's mood little changed over the past several weeks. President George W. Bush's approval rating is at 50%, up two points from the last two measures. Satisfaction with the way things are going remains in the doldrums—39% of Americans are satisfied, 58% are dissatisfied. And Gallup's two basic economic questions show a still-gloomy public.

The data about economic gloom are quite striking:

Overall, 31% of Americans rate economic conditions as either excellent or good, and 25% rate them as poor. That 6-point positive gap is essentially unchanged from the 7-point gap in late April, but is much smaller than the 19-point gap in early March and the 24-point gap at the beginning of the year.

Similarly, the public economic outlook is more negative now than it was at the beginning of the year. Currently, 61% of Americans say the economy is getting worse, and 32% say better—similar to the 61% worse and 31% better ratings in late April. But in early March, only 50% said the economy was getting worse, and 41% said better. And at the beginning of the year, more people expressed a positive than a negative rating—with 48% expecting the economy to improve and just 42% expecting it to get worse.

An earlier Gallup poll also found that:

Americans are also clearly unhappy with the way President George W. Bush is handling gas prices. Just more than one in four approve of his handling of the issue, and two-thirds believe there are reasonable things he can do to lower gas prices, despite his assertions that there is little he can do. A majority of Americans find Bush to blame for the gas prices, but foreign countries that produce oil and U.S. oil companies are more likely to be blamed.

The April 29–May 1 poll finds 78% of Americans terming the gas prices they are currently paying as "unfair," and just 20% saying they are "fair."

Americans do not expect relief from the high prices anytime soon. In fact, a majority of Americans expect gas prices will continue to rise over the next six months. Thirty-three percent believe gas prices will stabilize, and just 9% predict they will go back down.

The latest Marist poll has Bush's approval rating even lower than Gallup's recent polls, at 47 percent approval/49 percent disapproval. The poll also finds his Iraq approval rating at 40 percent/56 percent, his economic approval rating at 40 percent/46 percent, and his approval rating on the war on terrorism at a mere 48 percent/48 percent—an all-time low—including a distinctly underwhelming 42 percent/53 percent among independents.

Wow! What ever happened to all that legendary Bush political capital? Voters seem to be taking out their dissatisfaction directly on him these days, rather than cutting him endless slack.

William Schneider has a crisp answer in his May 10 column, "**What Political Capital?**":

The rule about political capital is, when you've got it, spend it, because you can't hold on to it. "I earned capital in this campaign, political capital," President Bush said two days after winning re-election, "and now I intend to spend it." And spend it is exactly what he is doing—with a bold agenda focused on Social Security, the Middle East, energy, judicial nominations, and the "culture of life."

But the president has a problem. His political capital is just about depleted. Bush had a huge supply of capital after 9/11. And he spent it—all of it—on Iraq. The 2004 presidential election, which he won with 51 percent of the vote, replenished only a little of his capital.

Look at what's happened to Bush's job-approval ratings, as of April: the Gallup Poll, 48 percent approval; *The Washington Post*/ABC News poll, 47 percent approval; and the CBS News, Associated Press, and American Research Group polls, all 44 percent. Bush's ratings have fallen since the beginning of the year in every poll. His average job-approval rating for April was 45 percent, the lowest on record for any president just three months into his second term.

Schneider concludes, after a discussion of California governor Arnold Schwarzenegger's similarly falling fortunes:

Schwarzenegger and Bush both overreached, putting forth agendas that went way beyond their mandates. They have both depleted their political capital. They're now into deficit spending.

Just so. But why should we be surprised? The GOP hasn't treated **the nation's** capital any more prudently.

New Polls Bring New Lows for Bush

The new Pew Research Center poll gives Bush his worst approval rating ever in that poll: just 43 percent, with 50 percent disapproval. And **the new Time/SRBI poll** has his rating at 46 percent approval/47 percent disapproval, also a low in that poll.

The *Time* poll has Bush's economic approval rating at 38 percent/56 percent, also a new low; his Iraq approval rating at 41 percent/55 percent, tied for his lowest ever; his Social Security rating at an abysmal 31/59; and even his rating on the war on terrorism at an unimpressive 53 percent/42 percent. **The SRBI report on the poll** points out that Bush is losing substantial ground among constituencies key to his narrow victory last November:

Central to Bush's November victory, according to the exit polls, was Bush's edge among older voters, his narrowing of the traditional Republican gender gap with female voters, and by evenly splitting the independent vote with Kerry. With Bush now barnstorming to promote his plans to revamp Social Security and with the shift away from terrorism as a dominant issue, older voters, women and independents have turned negative on Bush.

Among Americans age 65 and over, 55% now disapprove of the President's performance, with only 36% approving. Just before the November election, 51% of older registered voters approved of Bush. Greasing the skid, older Americans give Bush a very negative 25% approval—65% disapproval on Social Security. Older voters divide evenly on Bush's handling of terrorism (46% approve—44% disapprove).

Only 42% of women now approve of Bush, down from 51% just before the election. Males still approve of Bush's performance, 51%—45%, down from 56%—42% among registered voters in October. Women overwhelmingly disapprove of Bush's handling of Social Security by 34 percentage points, 27% approve—61% disapprove. Women split almost evenly on Bush's handling of terrorism (48% approve—47% disapprove). Independents now disapprove of Bush by 13 points, 41% approve—54% disapprove. Almost 3 in 5 independents give Bush negative scores on Social Security (59% disapprove), Iraq (60% disapprove), and handling the economy (60% disapprove).

The poll also shows a 59 percent to 28 percent margin against Republican efforts in the Senate to eliminate the use of the filibuster against Bush's judicial nominees. And, by 53 percent to 37 percent, the public says that other states should follow California's lead in funding all types of stem cell research.

Two just-released state polls underscore the extent to which the political winds have shifted against Bush. In Minnesota, a swing state that Bush narrowly lost to Kerry in 2004, **the latest *Star Tribune Minnesota* poll** shows the following:

With a rising number of Minnesotans unhappy about the nation's direction, President Bush's job-approval rating in the state hit an all-time low of 42 percent last week, according to the latest *Star Tribune Minnesota* Poll.

It's the lowest job-approval rating for a president in the Minnesota Poll in more than 12 years.

The poll found Minnesotans in a sour mood about the direction of the country:

Fifty-five percent said the country has gotten pretty seriously off on the wrong track, a 6

percentage point increase in four months.

Overall, the president's job-approval rating in Minnesota has declined by 9 points since January, the last time it was measured by the poll....

No president has fared so poorly in the Minnesota Poll since Bush's father received a 32 percent job-approval rating in October 1992, a month before he lost his reelection bid to Bill Clinton.

A new *Tribune*/WGN-TV poll in Illinois, where Bush was soundly defeated by Kerry in 2004, shows him losing support even in his relatively strong areas of the state:

President Bush's handling of the economy and sagging support for the war in Iraq have caused his support to erode further in Illinois since last fall, when he won re-election but lost the state to his Democratic rival by a wide margin.

Approval of the president's overall performance—41 percent in a statewide *Tribune*/WGN-TV poll--has slipped even in Chicago's collar counties and Downstate, which were once more likely to back Bush. A similar poll last October showed Bush's job approval rating at 45 percent. . . .

The president, of course, wasn't starting with a strong base of support in Illinois. The state's 5.27 million voters sided with Democrat John Kerry by a margin of more than 500,000 votes. Bush won 44.5 percent of the vote to Kerry's 54.8 percent, one of the president's poorest performances nationally.

And since the election, the poll found, his support has softened even further. And it has slumped in his erstwhile strongholds.

Before the election, a statewide survey by Market Shares Corp. indicated that 57 percent of Downstate voters approved of the president's overall job performance. In the latest survey, just 47 percent of respondents Downstate approved.

And what of Bush's strenuous efforts on behalf on his Social Security plan?

When asked about Bush's plan to let younger workers set aside some of the payroll taxes they pay for Social Security for private retirement savings accounts, 47 percent called it a bad idea, 33 percent a good idea.

Just as surveys have found nationally, younger voters are more likely to support the president's plan. Yet even among the youngest voters in Illinois, those aged 18–34, the president has failed to find majority support for his plan, with only 43 percent calling it a good idea.

My, my, sounds like there are some testy voters out there in the heartland. And, for that matter, all over the country these days. Voters were expecting something better out of Bush's second term and they're clearly not getting it. Until they do, these ratings are not likely to change and

may well get worse.

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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.