

The Battleground 2004 Poll

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Republican Strategic Analysis

By Ed Goeas

In the three months since the last Battleground poll a great deal has happened. America said its final farewell to Ronald Reagan, a truly great President. The war in Iraq heated up and American deaths mounted as the date for transition to an Iraqi government neared. The American economy also heated up, with nearly one million new jobs created over the last three months.

At the same time, little has changed in the basic dynamics of the 2004 Presidential Election. The American electorate remains closely divided – and the dominant issues of terrorism, the war in Iraq, and security here at home, and the economy and jobs are not only crowding out other issues – but the mixture of “good news” and “bad news” on these two issues is keeping both President Bush’s and Senator Kerry’s campaigns from gaining any sustainable traction with the voters. Both the parity of the two political parties and the intense polarization of the American Electorate continue with two distinct views of America and the world around it.

While the last three months have been filled with a year’s worth of major news events, it has also been a post-primary season that has seen a tremendous amount of resources spent on both sides. The Bush campaign has spent close to ninety million dollars on television, and the Kerry campaign along with their “527” allies have spent closer to one hundred and ten million dollars in paid advertising.

Two hundred million dollars does not buy what it used to. All this spending has resulted in the presidential ballot moving from a ballot that showed Kerry one-point up in late March (Bush 48% - Kerry 49%) to a ballot that stands today as a dead even race (Bush 48% - Kerry 48%)! This does not mean to say that there has not been movement up and down on the ballot over the intervening period. There have been some subtle changes in the underlining numbers of this latest Battleground Poll: better numbers for George W. Bush on some of the economic measurements and some slight slippage on the security measurements, and some slippage for John Kerry on the character issues.

However, with 125 days until the election the overall dynamic of a closely divided electorate remains firmly in place!

The “Big Three” Predictors of the Presidential Race

In the strategic analysis of the Battleground Poll released last March we discussed several traditional measures of public opinion that have been predictive of which party will win

the Presidency and how the results of those measurements were mixed. One of those key measurements mentioned was “presidential job approval,” and the fact that “*in modern presidential politics every incumbent president who had a job approval rating of fifty percent (50%) or better at this point of the campaign went on to win reelection in November.*”

While that statement of fact remains true, that does not mean that if George W. Bush’s presidential job approval slipped below fifty percent that he would be doomed to lose. In fact, looking back to presidential reelection campaigns over the last twenty-five years, there appears to be quite a gap with the presidential job approval rankings of those incumbent Presidents who were successful in their reelection campaigns and those who were not!

Jimmy Carter (Gallup June 27-30, 1980)	Approve 31%	Disapprove 58%
Ronald Reagan (Gallup June 30/July 2, 1984)	Approve 53%	Disapprove 37%
GHW Bush (Gallup June 26/July 1, 1992)	Approve 38%	Disapprove 55%
Bill Clinton (Gallup June 27-30, 1996)	Approve 52%	Disapprove 42%
G. W. Bush (Battleground June 20-23-2004)	Approve 51%	Disapprove 48%

[* *It is also interesting to note the increased polarization of the American electorate over the last twenty-five years as those voters not holding an opinion on presidential job approval has dropped from 11% for Carter, to 10% for Reagan, to 7% for GHW Bush, to 6% for Clinton, to 1% for George W. Bush!*]

Another measurement that is very predictive in presidential elections and shows encouraging movement in this latest Battleground Poll pertains to the question addressing which presidential candidate “*would do a better job keeping America prosperous.*” The results of this measurement went from a seven-point deficit last March (Kerry 49% - Bush 42%) to a one-point lead for George W. Bush (Bush 47% - Kerry 46%) – one of the largest shifts in the overall data.

The strengthening of President Bush’s numbers by a net eight points is encouraging for two reasons. First, the Democrats have never taken the White House unless they had a lead of seven-points or better on this measurement, and in the last Battleground Poll in March; John Kerry had reached that mark. (In our June 1992 Battleground Poll twenty-six percent (26%) said then President George H. Bush would be best at “keeping America Prosperous,” while forty-eight percent (48%) said Bill Clinton/H. Ross Perot would be better at “keeping America Prosperous.”)

Second, the improvement on this measurement for George W. Bush is a sign that improvements in the Nation’s economy (and Bush getting credit for those improvements) is finally beginning to have an impact with voters.

The final measurement that we have found to be highly predictive of where the race stands is the “Unaided Ballot.” As opposed to the prior two measurements which appear to be favoring President Bush’s reelection, this measurement has gotten slightly tighter over the last several months and appears to reflect not only the close division of the American electorate, but the higher than usual intensity of voters in this election.

In the late March Battleground Poll, Bush held a narrow lead of 42.9% to Kerry's 39.4% (with Nader/other candidates receiving mention by 2.4% of the voters). In this most recent Battleground Poll, George W. Bush has held at 43.1% but John Kerry has gained nearly two-points and now stands at 41.3% (Nader/other candidates still stand at 2.4%). Again, this measurement not only reflects the close division of the American electorate, but the higher than usual intensity of voters in this election with only thirteen percent (13%) of the respondents not naming a Presidential choice, a number lower than we usually see on election eve.

The Economy – Malaise is Passé

Want to get a sense of how the national economy is improving? You do not need unemployment figures or the consumer confidence index, just try to follow the shifting economic message of John Kerry and the national Democrats! After almost a year of bemoaning the jobless recovery, and the recent re-fabrication of a "misery index", Kerry and the Democrats have started despairing about the quality of the 1.4 million new jobs created since September.

Furthermore, the Kerry campaign has started running ads talking explicitly about how Kerry's optimistic about the economy. Because his earned media message has been doom and gloom, the Kerry campaign has to purchase optimism on TV. Perhaps the Kerry campaign has finally figured out what we noted in the last Battleground analysis – that it is awfully hard to run for President of the United States while being so negative about everything!

In the Battleground polling data over the last three months, there really has been steady improvement on the presidential measurements pertaining to the economy. Beyond the key economic measurement of "keeping America prosperous," where President Bush has moved from a net seven-point deficit (42% Bush/49% Kerry) to a one-point advantage (47% Bush/46% Kerry), perhaps the most important set of numbers to show positive movement for the President is on the jobs front. On this traditionally Democrat measurement of "creating jobs," George W. Bush moved from a seventeen-point deficit (37% Bush/54% Kerry) to a seven-point deficit (42% Bush/49% Kerry). As national job loss has been cut by over half, so has Kerry's perceived advantage of creating jobs. From a polling standpoint this shift is not only important because sixty-two percent (62%) of the voters in this survey cited jobs and unemployment as their top economic concern, but last September's Battleground Poll also showed an equal number of voters (61%), cited jobs and unemployment as the key economic area they would use to judge the health of the economy.

Two other presidential measurements on the economy retested in this latest Battleground Poll also showed improvements for President Bush. The first was the traditionally Republican measurement of "holding down taxes," where George W. Bush's advantage grew from a net thirteen-points (52% Bush/39% Kerry) to an eighteen-point advantage (54% Bush/36% Kerry). The second was "holding down Federal spending," where

George W. Bush's deficit declined from nine-points (39% Bush/48% Kerry) to only five-points (41% Bush/46% Kerry).

The following table compares vote behavior to the presidential ballot among voters with differing views of the economy. It is encouraging that there are some indications that many voters are beginning to shift in their attitudes about the economy on the presidential measurements. With the more generic economic trend-lines, however, there appears to be more of a lag in response to the improving economic news by voters. Results to these broader economic questions, and their lack of movement over the last three months, appear to be driven more by the polarized partisan atmosphere, than either lack of voter attention or lack of true impact by the improved economy. In fact, it should be noted that the only group that the President ran behind Republican vote behavior was with those voters who felt the economy was poor!

In thinking about the economy, how would you rate the current state of the economy?				
<u>Vote Behavior</u>		<i>Excellent/Good 37%</i> <u>Presidential Ballot</u>		<u>Performance</u>
Republican	79%	Bush	86%	+ 7
Democrat	6%	Kerry	12%	+ 6
<u>Vote Behavior</u>		<i>Just Fair 41%</i> <u>Presidential Ballot</u>		<u>Performance</u>
Republican	31%	Bush	34%	+ 3
Democrat	62%	Kerry	61%	- 1
<u>Vote Behavior</u>		<i>Poor 22%</i> <u>Presidential Ballot</u>		<u>Performance</u>
Republican	13%	Bush	11%	- 2
Democrat	81%	Kerry	83%	+2

This latest Battleground Poll also showed good news on the horizon pertaining to voter attitudes about the economy. When voters were asked about their view of the economy six months from now, the shift was very positive. In fact, the number of voters who felt the economy would be "excellent/good" grew from thirty-seven percent (37%) today to a majority (51%) of voters who felt the economy would be excellent or good six months from now.

At the same time, the percentage of voters who felt the economy was “just fair” shrank from forty-one percent (41%) to thirty-three percent (33%) and the percentage of voters who felt the economic outlook would be “poor” fell from twenty-two percent (22%) to fourteen percent (14%).

These results are significant, in that public perception about the economy is very slow to move – generally it is assumed that both good economic news and bad economic news takes about six months to be factored into the people’s vote equation. That not only means that the trend of economic growth will continue to have a positive effect to voters’ attitudes towards the economy and George W. Bush, but also means it is unlikely that John Kerry will get the economic bad news to re-direct that perception before election day...no matter how many times he shifts his economic message!

The War on Terrorism/The War in Iraq

While the voters focus on both the security/war on terrorism matrix and the economy/jobs matrix, they are certainly seeing more about the war on terrorism and more specifically the war in Iraq on a daily basis than news about the economy. There is no question that the overwhelming tone and subject of the press coverage on the war in Iraq in recent months has been overwhelmingly negative. At the same time, while the President’s numbers have declined somewhat, the data in this latest Battleground poll would suggest that his advantage over John Kerry on the security/war on terrorism issue matrix has not declined as much as one would expect – and certainly has been more than offset by improvements in the economic issue matrix!

When voters were asked which presidential candidate, George W. Bush or John Kerry would do a better job “safeguarding America from a terrorist threat,” President Bush held a nineteen-point lead over John Kerry (Bush 59%/Kerry 36%), a four-point decline in Bush’s advantage over the last three months. On the issue of which of the two presidential candidates would do a better job handling the war in Iraq, George W. Bush holds a nine-point lead over John Kerry (Bush 51%/Kerry 42%), representing a five-point decline in Bush’s advantage since last March. (*Note: this question was asked slightly differently from the Iraqi question asked in late-March.)

The Presidential Measurements on Character

The biggest thing in this latest Battleground data the Kerry campaign has to be most concerned with between now and November’s election, is the equal focus of voters (and the back and forth) on homeland security, the war on terrorism, and the war in Iraq and the economy and jobs, while he is making no progress on the character issues. In fact, John Kerry appears to be losing some ground on the characters issues. If this “whipsaw” trend of voters never consistently receiving good news on both the security issues and the economic issues (or consistently hearing bad news on both issues) continues into the Fall campaign, you’re going to see the character issue become increasingly important to voters in their final vote decision of the campaign.

In fact, if you look at the five character issues that we usually track in our Battleground Polls, John Kerry is only ahead on one of those character measurements – “cares about people like you” – where John Kerry leads George W. Bush by five-points (41% Bush/46% Kerry). That’s not particularly good news for John Kerry. These numbers have not improved over the last three months, and while Democrats traditionally have a double-digit lead with this question, in light of improving economic numbers (which usually drive the “cares about you” data), Kerry’s opportunity to run a populist campaign appears to be drawing to a close.

On the character measurements of “represents my values,” President Bush has a four-point lead (48% - 44%), and on “honesty and trustworthy,” Bush has a three-point lead versus Kerry (45% - 42%).

Of the two critical character measurements, on “says what he believes,” Bush has a twenty-three-point lead (57% - 34%), and is a “strong leader,” Bush has a sixteen-point lead (54% - 38%). President Bush held his lead from three months earlier on the leadership measurement, but actually gained eight-points in his advantage over John Kerry on the component of “says what he believe.” Of these two measurements, “says what he believes” is most important for Kerry at this juncture of the campaign, because if the perception develops with Kerry that he in fact is just saying what people want to hear, as opposed to saying what he really believes, then his credibility to move any issues later in the campaign will be undermined.

However, the second of these character measurements, “is a strong leader,” will be the key character issue to voters, as we get closer to the election. In fact, in this latest Battleground Poll, we tested a new twist to “is a strong leader,” that is part of the Kerry campaign’s message. The Kerry campaign has been critical of George W. Bush as a “steady, consistent leader,” but again President Bush maintains a seventeen-point advantage (54% - 37%) in this leadership measurement.

The Edge on Voter Contact

While the two Parties have reached a point of true parity on party identification (43% Republican/43% Democratic), Democrats still hold a four-point advantage in voter behavior (Republican 45%/Democrats 49%) in this most recent Battleground Poll. An analysis of presidential ballot performance, in relation to vote behavior in this latest Battleground Poll, is extremely instructive in exposing the strengths and weaknesses of the Bush and Kerry campaigns in a very polarized political environment.

One example is to look at the voters grouped into their “open-ended” response on most important problem. As seen below, President Bush and John Kerry are both slightly over-performing voters stated vote performance among voters focused on economic concerns. Among those most concerned about security issues, President Bush is over-performing Republican vote performance (+4), while Kerry is under-performing with this groups Democratic vote behavior. On the remaining issues, including education and moral

values, President Bush is over-performing while Kerry is under-performing vote performance by the same margin as those voters focused on the security issues.

What do you think is the number one problem for the next President to deal with—that is, what is the problem that you and your family think is most important for the next President to deal with? (Open End)

<i>Economy/Taxes/Healthcare</i>		<i>35%</i>		
<u>Vote Behavior</u>		<u>Presidential Ballot</u>		<u>Performance</u>
Republican	40%	Bush	41%	+ 1
Democrat	53%	Kerry	54%	+ 1

<i>Security/Terrorism/Iraq</i>		<i>34%</i>		
<u>Vote Behavior</u>		<u>Presidential Ballot</u>		<u>Performance</u>
Republican	50%	Bush	54%	+ 4
Democrat	44%	Kerry	42%	- 2

<i>Education/Morals/Other</i>		<i>31%</i>		
<u>Vote Behavior</u>		<u>Presidential Ballot</u>		<u>Performance</u>
Republican	45%	Bush	49%	+ 4
Democrat	49%	Kerry	47%	- 2

Another indicator of voter contact is the perceived level of attention that voters have from the campaigns. The box below illustrates the voter behavior of voters according to their perceived level of attention from the campaigns. Bush is over-performing among those who believe they are receiving a lot or some attention and Kerry is slightly under-performing with this sub-group. There is no change in vote behavior among those who believe they are receiving little or no attention. The Bush campaign appears to be succeeding in its efforts to target and involve its supporters.

How much attention do you feel that the politicians and candidates are paying to people like yourself during the current election campaign? Would you say they pay a lot of attention, some attention, a little attention, or no attention at all?

A lot of attention/ some attention 60.4%

<u>Bush</u>		<u>Kerry</u>	
GOP Vote Behavior	49.8%	DEM Vote Behavior	44.5%
Bush Ballot	<u>55.1%</u>	Kerry Ballot	<u>42.7%</u>
PERFORMANCE	+ 5.3%	PERFORMANCE	- 1.8%

Little attention/ No attention 36.7%

<u>Bush</u>		<u>Kerry</u>	
GOP Vote Behavior	36.2%	DEM Vote Behavior	56.9%
Bush Ballot	<u>36.2%</u>	Kerry Ballot	<u>56.4%</u>
PERFORMANCE	0%	PERFORMANCE	- 0.5%

Another interesting measurement of voter contact is the amount of political advertising that voters have seen. The chart below illustrates vote behavior and amount of political advertising seen. Among the 74.5% of voters who have seen or heard a political advertisement in the past week, Bush is over-performing by 4% while Kerry is under-performing with this group. As with the previous group, the Bush campaign appears to be succeeding in building support among those who are receiving political advertising.

How many times would you say that you recall seeing or hearing a political advertisement during the past week on either TV or radio? Would you say it was none, one to five times, six to ten times, or more than ten times?

One to five times 37.4%
Six to ten times 18.3%
Ten or more times 18.8%

Seen or heard in past week total 74.5%

<u>Bush</u>		<u>Kerry</u>	
GOP Vote Behavior	46.2%	DEM Vote Behavior	47.5%
Bush Ballot	<u>49.9%</u>	Kerry Ballot	<u>45.6%</u>
PERFORMANCE	+ 3.7%	PERFORMANCE	- 1.9%

Consistent Approvers/Consistent Disapprovers

One area that President Bush's numbers are holding up, especially in contrast to the last three years of the Clinton Presidency, is in the area of personal approval. Even though the electorate is fairly polarized along party lines and at this point Democratic voters, if given a choice, would vote for a Democrat for president, there is a pool of voters who approve of the President personally. When voters were asked (following the "job approval" question) if they approved of President Bush personally, sixty-three percent (63%) of voters responded that they approved of the President personally (Bill Clinton never broke 30% in the last three years of his Presidency), and twenty-nine percent (29%) disapproved of the President personally. In segmenting the job approval question with the personal approval question from this latest Battleground Poll, forty-eight percent (48%) of voters approved of George W. Bush on both measurements, and twenty-eight percent (28%) disapproved of the President on both measurements.

As this presidential campaign remains close and moves towards the November Election, one group of voters that may play a very pivotal role is the fifteen percent of the voters who are "drop-off" voters and disapprove of the job the President is doing, but approve of him personally. Currently, George W. Bush under-performs Republican vote behavior with this group by seven percent, but leads the vote performance with this group on Taxes (+15), terrorism (+7), and is even with his handling of the Iraqi War. More importantly, George W. Bush outperforms with this group of voters on "is a strong leader" (+6), is a "strong, consistent leader" (+10), and "says what he believes" (+17). There is certainly an opportunity for George W. Bush to "grow" his vote with this group

of voters. In fact, if this group of voters ended up casting their ballots at their same level of vote behavior, it would effect what is a dead even presidential ballot by a net two percentage points!

Congress and the Fall Elections

Along with looking at the current political environment and the presidential election, the most recent Battleground Poll took a quick look at where voters were leaning in this November's congressional elections. Simply put, it appears that the key question for the upcoming Congressional elections is the level of voter attention or even interest in these elections. With the nation facing big issues and unprecedented levels of spending on the presidential level, it remains to be seen when, or even how, voters will focus their interest in the elections for Congress.

There does not appear to be a major issue on which either party enjoys an unexpected advantage. With the exception of education, any changes on the issue handling series are within the margin of error. Both parties hold advantages on their traditional issues. The Democrats have the advantage on "protecting the middle class" (36%-57%), "improving the health care system" (33%-57%), "improving education" (37%-53%), "strengthening Social Security" (34%-56%), and "creating jobs" (41%-52%). The GOP has the advantage on "holding the line on taxes" (53%-38%), "safeguarding America from a terrorist threat" (55%-35%), and "dealing with Iraq" (52%-39%). The two parties are statistically tied on "shares my values" (45%-48%), "keeping America prosperous" (47%-46%), and "federal spending" (43%-45%).

The Republican majority in Congress has clearly been hurt by an inability to get their message out regarding education reforms, Medicare, Social Security, and economic stimulus efforts due to the overwhelming news focus on terrorism/national security and economic problems at the presidential level. However, these problems may have been blunted because a plurality of voters (28%) indicate that the most important issue for Congress to deal with is "safeguarding America from a terrorist threat" – an issue on which the GOP Congress has a twenty-point advantage.

This inability of either party to gain an advantage on key issues is illustrated by the Congressional generic ballot. On this ballot, the Democrats have a 48% to 41% advantage. While this appears to be a sizable advantage, this ballot is actually under-performing Democratic vote behavior by 1% and under-performing GOP vote behavior by 4%, and appears to be driven more by lack of attention of the voters than disapproval of Republicans in Congress. Neither party has fully captured all of its supporters at the Congressional vote level.

Another challenge for both Congressional Republicans and Congressional Democrats is the desire of voters for independent members of Congress. Sixty percent (60%) of voters indicate that they are interested in electing a Member of Congress who votes independently. Among Democratic voters, 34% are interested in electing a Member of Congress who votes independently from their National Democratic Leadership. Among

Republican voters, 26% are interested in electing a Member of Congress who votes independently from President Bush.

While the congressional data in this most recent Battleground Poll appears to be fairly stagnant – it appears that voters’ attention is being consumed by major events, the security and economic issue concerns, and the presidential campaigns – little comfort can be taken by candidates on either side of the aisle. Coattails in a presidential campaign are largely created, not by the size of the victory, but by a late surge in either presidential campaign in the final weeks of the election. Given the closely divided electorate and the current political environment, this scenario looks very unlikely, but not out of the realm of possibilities.

Conclusions

One traditional measurement in predicting the outcome of a presidential election not mentioned earlier in this analysis is the traditional survey question of whether voters feel the country is moving in the “Right Direction” or is off on the “Wrong Track.” In the Republican analysis of last March’s Battleground Poll, there were certainly some questions whether this measurement is holding the same weight as in past presidential elections. Not only had this “right direction/wrong track” measurement shown more volatility than in past elections, but President Bush’s job approval had (and continues to) run ahead of those voters feeling that the country is moving in the right direction by double-digit margins.

In the past, this measurement more directly reflected the voters’ judgment of a President’s job performance. In the current measurement of the direction of the country, however, George W. Bush is over-performing vote behavior by ten-points with voters who feel the country is moving in the “right direction,” and is maintaining his ballot strength with voters who are “unsure about the direction of the country” and with voters who feel the country is off on the “wrong track.” In contrast, John Kerry is under-performing with voters regardless of their response about the direction of the country.

What is interesting about the traditional measurement of “Right Direction/Wrong Track” is that it applies directly to the strategic hypothesis of the two presidential campaigns. John Kerry’s campaign strategy is based on the belief that voters’ ultimate vote decision in the November election is solely based on their feelings about the incumbent. George W. Bush’s campaign strategy is based on the belief that voters make their decision on the job performance of the President, but also makes a choice between the two candidates.

It is true that George W. Bush’s campaign is vulnerable to events and negative news. It is also true that much of the focus in recent months on the War in Iraq has acted as a drag on the campaign getting any sustainable traction with the voters. However, one gets the sense that the Kerry campaign’s strategy, while most likely their best shot, has put him in the position of being the pessimistic candidate, hoping that bad things happen both in the War on Terrorism and the economy, so that he can be the answer. Ultimately, that not

only makes John Kerry vulnerable to major events out of his control, but is also a tough platform for any presidential campaign to be waged from.

Of the four scenarios for the November election – Bush wins big, Kerry wins big, Bush wins by a narrow margin, Kerry wins by a narrow margin – the one scenario that appears to be unlikely is Kerry wins big (it is hard to imagine this campaign finishing with bad news on both the economy and security issue matrix). While President Bush may not receive enough consistently good news on both the security and economic fronts to get traction with the voters before the Fall, given a draw on these two issues matrixes, voters may very well move to how they feel about the character of these two men in deciding how to cast their vote.