

# The Battleground 2008

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## Democratic Strategic Analysis

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*Just days before the President offers his State of the Union address to the nation, the issue that continues to dominate the national debate is the same one that looms so menacingly over his legacy: the war in Iraq. As in the weeks leading up to the November mid-term elections, voters are intensely dissatisfied with the course in which the country is headed as well as the man charged with setting that course. As such, the opportunity – and need – for Democrats to continue to define their brand of leadership has never been greater.*

*The dramatic altering of the balance of power in Washington was a mandate for change. Americans are expecting Congressional Democrats to be the catalysts for that change. Voters give Democrats strong advantages over both their Republican counterparts in Congress and the President on Iraq, as well as on a host of domestic issues, including cleaning up the corruption in Washington.*

*Democrats' election message of a new direction for the country took hold; as a result, expectations are high. While they are striving to deliver on their promises, Democrats will need to contend with a hostile President, who is fighting desperately to resuscitate his image and recast his legacy for the history books from one of failure. Nowhere will this task be more challenging than on the war in Iraq. Now voters expect Democrats to hold up their end, to make a difference despite the limited power Congress has to affect an ongoing war.*

*As the new Congress digs in and gets to work, focus is quickly shifting to the 2008 Presidential election. Both Parties have several prominent candidates in these early months, though a changing candidate field and increased attention are sure to keep the dynamics of the race fluid. As they look toward 2008, the Democrats will need to build on the broad support the public afforded them in the 2006 election by showing voters what they – and the nation – are capable of when given the opportunity to affect positive change. The Republicans are in the unenviable position of having to regain a Congressional majority and define themselves as leaders for the 21<sup>st</sup> century, while sitting in the shadow of an increasingly unpopular Republican President, whom they have solidly supported for the past 6 years.*

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## **WAR IN IRAQ DRIVING VOTERS' PESSIMISM**

Voters continue to be quite negative in their outlook on the direction of the country. The President is taking the brunt of much of their dissatisfaction but it is spilling into the Republican Party as well.

Sixty-four percent of likely voters say the country is pretty seriously off on the wrong track, with more than half (51 percent) feeling this way strongly – almost no change since just before the mid-term elections when 62 percent said the country was off on the wrong track (51 percent strongly). Voters who were key to the Democrats' victory in November remain among the most pessimistic, including independents (62 percent), voters in the Northeast (59 percent strongly wrong track), women (53 percent), unmarried voters (68 percent), and those who identify the war in Iraq as the most important problem facing the country (68 percent).

The war is clearly driving much of the public's concern for the country. Nearly three in 10 voters (28 percent) identify the war as the most important problem facing the country today. This is twice that of the next biggest concern: economic issues (14 percent). In what is becoming a familiar pattern, groups that were pivotal in swinging the balance of power in the midterm elections are disproportionately likely to cite the war as the most important problem. Seniors (31 percent), independents (30 percent), voters in the Northeast (32 percent) and the South (31 percent), and those who disapprove of the President's job performance (39 percent) are particularly likely to say the war is the most important problem. The notion that intense concern over Iraq is limited to base-voting Democrats is a fallacy.

Not surprisingly, voters also identify the war as the most important issue for Congress to work on (25 percent). Counting their first and second top issues, a whopping 43 percent of the voters point to the war. This is followed by illegal immigration (14 percent), the war on terrorism and homeland security (12 percent), health care (11 percent), and the economy (11 percent). While Democrats in Congress have a strong and particularly advantageous domestic platform, voters say the war was a driving force for changing the balance of power in Washington. Forty-three percent of voters say the midterm elections were about the war in Iraq and sent a clear message that the U.S. should change the way it is fighting there. The remaining voters split between saying the election was a referendum on the domestic and economic agenda of the President and Republicans in Congress (22 percent) and the election was a vote against the partisanship and gridlock in Congress (26 percent). Even a plurality of independents believes the election was about changing course in Iraq (36 percent), compared to 30 percent who say it was about ending the partisan stalemate and 21 percent who say it was about rejecting the domestic and economic agenda policies of the Bush administration and the Congressional Republicans.

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**BUSH'S IMAGE REMAINS NEGATIVE, VOTERS SLIGHTLY MORE POSITIVE ABOUT CONGRESS, PARTICULARLY THE DEMOCRATS**

More than half (53 percent) of all voters have a negative personal image of the President, with 42 percent saying they have a strongly unfavorable image of him. Despite the White House's repeated efforts to improve the President's image, these numbers have not moved since our last Battleground survey just before the midterm elections (53 percent unfavorable to 43 percent favorable).

Meanwhile, a majority of voters (55 percent) disapprove of Bush's job performance as President, with nearly half of voters (47 percent) saying they strongly disapprove. Just one-fourth (26 percent) of voters strongly approve of the job the President is doing. As expected, Democrats are particularly negative about the job performance on the President (90 percent disapprove), however nearly six-in-ten (59 percent) independents are negative as well. Republicans continue to support the President (80 percent approve), though 17 percent of voters in his own party disapprove. Voters clearly lay much of the blame for their concerns about the country at Bush's feet, as nearly three-fourths (73 percent) of those who say the country is off on the wrong track disapprove of the President's job performance and 76 percent of those who say the war is the biggest problem facing the country.

The GOP's woes might begin with their President, but they certainly do not end there. In fact, Republicans in Congress are even less favorably viewed than Bush. While 45 percent of voters have a favorable view of Bush, just 41 percent say the same about Republicans in Congress, and with even less intensity (26 percent strong versus 13 percent respectively). Nearly half (48 percent) of all likely voters have an unfavorable view of Republicans in Congress.

Democrats in Congress however are seen solidly net positively with favorable ratings ahead of Bush and the Republicans. A majority of voters, 51 percent, have a favorable image of Congressional Democrats (though just 25 percent strong), while just over one-third (36 percent) have a negative image of them (19 percent strong). The contrast is particularly dramatic among independent voters who give Republicans solidly negative ratings of 29 percent favorable and 49 percent unfavorable and Democrats positive at 47 percent favorable to 33 percent unfavorable.

The new Democratic leaders in Congress have slightly more polarizing images than the Party as a whole, though House Speaker Nancy Pelosi is notable for her broad popularity. Thirty-eight percent of voters have a favorable impression of Pelosi while 31 percent have a negative impression of her, and nearly one-third (32 percent) does not know her well enough to have an impression. Senate Majority leader Harry Reid is less familiar to voters, with nearly seven-in-ten (69 percent) of voters unable to rate him. Fifteen percent of voters 15 percent say they have a favorable impression of him and 18 percent have an unfavorable impression. There is a very substantial gender gap in terms of ratings for Speaker Pelosi—women rate her solidly positive (42 percent favorable to 24 percent unfavorable) while men split their ratings (34 percent to 38 percent). Married

women (43 percent to 29 percent) and unmarried women (41 percent to 17 percent), and younger women (38 percent to 22 percent) and older women (45 percent to 25 percent) all like the first woman Speaker.

## DEMOCRATS AND REPUBLICANS ON THE ISSUES

As the 110<sup>th</sup> Congress gets underway, with Democrats in the majority of both Houses, voters give Democrats an advantage on a number of top issues. On the issue that has the most attention, Iraq, voters give Democrats an 8-point advantage. Democrats also continue to hold strong advantages on jobs (14 points), energy independence (26 points), prescription drugs (35 points), health care (39 points), and Social Security (24 points). They are also afforded a strong advantage on changing the corruption in Washington (16 points) – a theme that permeated the recent elections and fed voters’ appetite for change. The two Parties are more closely divided on the economy (3-point Democratic advantage), taxes (3-point Republican advantage), and illegal immigration (4-point Republican advantage). The Democrats have a bigger advantage on jobs (+14) than on the economy overall (+3). That is especially true among blue-collar workers. It is very important going into the 2008 elections that Democrats develop a stronger image on the economy and use their advantage on health care, jobs, and energy to build that. Congressional Republicans still maintain advantages on their traditional stronghold issues of terrorism (17 points) and moral values (8 points). It is worth noting, however, that among independents, Democrats hold solid advantages on the economy (19 points), moral values (8 points), and are tied with Republicans on taxes (even) and illegal immigration (-1 point). Only on the issue of terrorism do Republicans hold a lead over Democrats (10 points), though that is noticeably lower than their overall national advantage.

<i>CONGRESSIONAL DEMOCRATS VS REPUBLICANS</i>			
	<i>Democrats Better</i>	<i>Republicans Better</i>	<i>Dem-GOP</i>
<i>Health care</i>	63%	24%	+39
<i>Prescription drugs</i>	61%	26%	+35
<i>Energy independence</i>	55%	29%	+26
<i>Social Security</i>	56%	32%	+24
<i>Corruption in Washington</i>	44%	28%	+16
<i>Jobs</i>	51%	37%	+14
<i>Iraq</i>	48%	40%	+8
<i>The economy</i>	46%	43%	+3
<i>Taxes</i>	44%	47%	-3
<i>Illegal immigration</i>	38%	42%	-4
<i>Moral values</i>	36%	44%	-8
<i>Terrorism</i>	35%	52%	-17

When voters are asked to compare the President to Congressional Democrats on the issue, Bush holds advantages over Congressional Democrats on terrorism (15 points) and moral values (12 points). However, unlike Congressional Republicans, voters do not

give him an advantage on immigration (8 point Democratic advantage) or taxes (6 point Democratic advantage). Democrats hold similar advantages over Bush on Iraq (7 points) as well as the top domestic issues, including prescription drugs (33 points), health care (32 points), energy independence (24 points), Social Security (23 points), jobs (10 points), corruption in Washington (9 points), illegal immigration (8 points), and the economy (6 points). Bush does not particularly help his party on any issue except moral values and hurts them on taxes and illegal immigration. Voters still give him some personal credibility on honesty but his image has collapsed on effectiveness and policies. The future direction of the country for the next generation remains a strong thematic. Only 39 percent of Americans believe the future of their children will be better off. This includes only 36 percent of high school graduates and 40 percent of those with some college education and 40 percent among college educated voters.

<i>CONGRESSIONAL DEMOCRATS VS BUSH</i>			
	<i>Democrats Better</i>	<i>Bush Better</i>	<i>Dem-Bush</i>
<i>Prescription drugs</i>	60%	27%	33%
<i>Healthcare</i>	61%	29%	32%
<i>Energy independence</i>	56%	32%	24%
<i>Social Security</i>	56%	33%	23%
<i>Jobs</i>	52%	42%	10%
<i>Corruption in Washington</i>	44%	35%	9%
<i>Iraq</i>	49%	42%	7%
<i>Illegal immigration</i>	43%	35%	7%
<i>Economy</i>	50%	44%	6%
<i>Taxes</i>	50%	44%	6%
<i>Moral values</i>	38%	50%	-12%
<i>Terrorism</i>	39%	54%	-15%

### **The war in Iraq**

Bringing about change domestically is critical for the Democrats. In the long run voters are also looking for Democrats to bring a change in direction on the war in Iraq. Democrats are seen as an agent of change and a protest against the current policies. Voters have shifted from early last year when they gave the Republicans a 3-point advantage on the war, and now look to Democrats to bring about a resolution – increasing the advantage they give Democrats on the issues from a 2-point advantage just before the November elections to an 8-point advantage now. Among independents, Democrats own a 29-point advantage on Iraq over the Republicans in Congress.

Almost half (47 percent) of voters say they do not believe the war in Iraq is worth fighting anymore, and there is great intensity (40 percent strongly). Just one-third (34 percent) of voters strongly believes the war has been worth fighting, with another 12 percent somewhat agreeing.

The timeline for troop withdrawal was a key issue in a number of midterm election contests and as Bush proposes increasing troop levels, he finds himself once

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again at odds with public sentiment. Just 32 percent of voters believe the U.S. should keep troops in Iraq until the situation is stable no matter how long that takes, a precipitous drop from the 49 percent of voters who felt that way just before the election. A 44 percent plurality of voters supports a plan to start bringing troops home – either immediately (16 percent) or on a 1-year timeline (28 percent). Just 21 percent of voters support the President’s plan to increase the number of troops in Iraq. Even among Republicans only 31 percent support increasing the number of troops. However, voters are also hesitant about immediate withdrawal. Only 16 percent of all voters and 25 percent of Democrats support immediate withdrawal. Voters want to see change in the direction of Iraq but are unclear how to get there.

## **LOOKING AHEAD TO 2008**

### *Images of the Candidates*

With the 2006 elections over and the Democratic Congress moving forward with their agenda, attention is already shifting to the 2008 Presidential race. While most Republicans are distancing themselves from Bush, those competing in the GOP primary are running hard to their base. Former Bush foe, John McCain, has come out in support of the military escalation in Iraq. The Arizona Senator enjoyed broad favorable ratings among voters at the time of the survey (62 percent favorable, including 20 percent strong). One-fourth of the electorate has a negative impression of him. Just 14 percent say they are not familiar enough with him to have an impression.

Also well known and liked is Rudy Giuliani. Sixty-four percent of voters have a favorable impression of the former NYC mayor (27 percent strong), while 22 percent have a negative view.

Not nearly as well known is Governor Mitt Romney, who will have to compete with Giuliani for regional support in the Northeast. Currently, 65 percent of voters do not have a firm impression of him. Among those who do, one-fourth (22 percent) has a favorable view while 13 percent are negative.

Among all Republican voters 81 percent have a favorable view of Giuliani, 70 percent of McCain, and only 31 percent of Romney who is not that well known, even among Republicans.

On the Democratic side, Hillary Clinton has the strongest favorable ratings among those tested. A majority (51 percent) views her positively (27 percent strongly), however among those with a negative impression (46 percent) of the Senator, intensity is strong (35 percent). Just 3 percent of the electorate is not familiar enough to have an impression of the Senator.

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Both John Edwards (49 percent favorable) and Barack Obama (46 percent) are well known and well liked. Though their favorable ratings are not quite as high as Clinton's neither is as polarizing a figure (29 percent and 21 percent unfavorable respectively). Among all Democratic voters 85 percent like Clinton, 71 percent like Edwards, and 65 percent like Obama.

### *Head-to-Heads*

Almost 33 months from the election, the head-to-head match-ups among the frontrunners give the top Republicans, McCain and Giuliani, slight advantages over Clinton and Obama. Clinton loses trial heats against both Republicans by identical margins, trailing Giuliani and McCain by 10 points, 53 percent to 43 percent, in both scenarios. Nearly one-third of the electorate strongly supports Clinton in both match-ups (31 percent and 29 percent, respectively). While the Republicans both enjoy greater intense support than Clinton, Giuliani's is higher than McCain's (43 percent and 38 percent definite support, respectively).

Obama performs similarly against the two Republican frontrunners, though he fairs slightly better than Clinton when matched against Giuliani. Although he trails Giuliani by 8-points (49 percent to 41 percent), neither manages majority support. And among those who say they will definitely vote for their candidate the electorate is split: 31 percent definitely for Giuliani and 32 percent of Obama. McCain draws a slight majority when matched against Senator Obama (51 percent to 39 percent), however both candidates enjoy similar intensity of support (29 percent and 27 percent definite support, respectively).

Clearly, these are preliminary measures of an undefined race. The dynamics of 2008 will fluctuate as they are be shaped by the growing familiarity of the other candidates, the national debate, and events on the campaign trail over the coming months. Republicans, in particular, will have to navigate turbulent waters as they contend with an incumbent President, who despite his unpopularity and lame-duck status, is determined to remain a focus of attention throughout the remainder of his term. They will have to hope that the last casualty of the Iraq war is their soon-to-be ex-President, and not the Republican Party as a whole.