

The Battleground 2008

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Republican Strategic Analysis

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For all the discussion about the 2006 elections, what happened, and what those elections meant, the only thing that is clear is that the Democratic Party and Democrats won, and are now in control of both the U.S. House of Representatives and the U.S. Senate. Yes, the Democratic campaigns showed a consistency and discipline of message seldom seen in Democratic campaigns over the last decade, but in an election where barely fifty percent (50%) of registered voters turned out, it is hard to see how the election was in any way a mandate for the national Democrats. Nor can 2006 be portrayed as a re-alignment election, when exit polling showed both Republican turnout and “party loyalty” – Republicans voting for Republican candidates versus Democratic voters voting for Democratic candidates – were both within the margin of error. Republicans lost because Independent voters voted heavily against Republican candidates!

What is missed in much of the analysis of the 2006 election is the fact that the onus to govern is on the Democrats. Their strategy in recent years of debate, delay, and divide now turns into a strategy of decide, deliver and defend – they must decide what they stand for, deliver real solutions, and defend both their intent and the goals and objectives of their solutions with the American people.

The Republican Party for their part is like a badly beaten down stock – but a stock that is a good buy for the future. The party’s base is still strong, it has trimmed many of its weaker operations, and it has returned to the basic principles and products that made it a strong stock in the first place.

From my perspective, President George W. Bush has served both his country and party well. I believe history will be kind to the President as a man that made the hard decisions in a war against an indefinable enemy and an even more indefinable point of victory, even at the expense of his presidential credibility and personal popularity. Certainly with the Republican Party, no President has done more to generate the money and resources to keep the core of the party strong in the face of adversity. While the President will remain a target for the Democrats for the remainder of his term, with neither the President nor Vice President on the ballot in 2008, those attacks will have less and less to do with the 2008 presidential landscape. Over the next six months, it is more likely that voter attention will increasingly shift towards, and be framed by, the future leaders of the

Democratic and Republican Parties – the presidential candidates of the 2008 election. It is here that the stock of the Republican Party looks like a good buy!

The War in Iraq

The war in Iraq leads as both the most important problem in the country (28%) and dominates the list of issues voters want Congress to address -- given three choices, fifty-five percent (55%) pick the war as one of their issues. In contrast, the next tier of issues - - health care costs (34%), terrorism and homeland security (33%), and improving the economy and creating jobs (32%) are selected by around one-third of the electorate.

Unlike reports to the contrary, Americans remain split on their opinion of whether the war in Iraq is worth fighting or not, with forty-six percent (46%) saying the war is worth fighting and forty-eight percent (48%) saying the war is not worth fighting. There is slightly more intensity for the “not worth fighting” (40% strongly) than “worth fighting” (34% strongly). However, for the most part, it does appear that voters are continuing to consider the importance of this conflict beyond the day to day battles, even in light of negative news on how the war is going.

Voters are also fairly split on where to proceed with the war. They were offered four options – (1) immediate withdrawal, (2) withdrawal within one year, (3) indefinite stay until the situation is stable, or (4) a temporary increase in troops. Forty-four percent (44%) of likely voters coalesce around the two positions most frequently articulated by Democrats in Congress – sixteen percent (16%) wanting an immediate withdrawal and twenty-eight percent (28%) wanting a withdrawal within one year. A majority of the likely electorate (53%) coalesce around the President’s stated goal of forces staying until the situation is confirmed stable (32%) or the President’s plan for a troop surge to stabilize the situation more quickly (21%). (It should also be noted that support for more troops grew by a net 10-points throughout our fielding of the survey last week, but the increase for more troops came directly from those voters that want our forces to stay until Iraq is stable.)

While the war in Iraq has certainly been a struggle that has imposed considerable costs on the American military and their families, a majority (53%) of the electorate remains in support of the President’s objectives in this conflict and fully eighty-four percent (84%) of the likely electorate is willing to continue this effort for at least one more year.

It should be noted that these questions on Iraq are a break with our reluctance to conduct polling about the conduct and strategy of military conflicts. It remains my strong belief

that polling should not be used to second guess past practices by the military or the strategic decisions of military leaders. These questions on the Iraq conflict were designed to gauge current attitudes about the war and the views of the likely electorate about the future of the conflict. In both of these cases, voters are much more split than is often portrayed by the President's political opponents and many in the news media.

President George W. Bush

In examining the outcome of the 2006 elections and its impact on the view of the Bush Administration and Congressional Republicans, it seems clear that these elections were about voter frustration over Iraq and voter frustration over partisan gridlock. In fact, on a question with three choices about what the outcome of the 2006 elections means:

- Forty-two percent (42%) selected “these elections were about the war in Iraq and sent a clear message that the US should change the way it is fighting the war there,”
- Twenty-six percent (26%) selected “these elections were a vote against partisan bickering and gridlock in Congress and sent a message that Congress should work in a bipartisan way to solve problems,” and
- Twenty-two percent (22%) selected “these elections were a rejection of the domestic and economic agenda and policies of the Bush Administration and the Congressional Republicans.”

With the President making a significant change in our tactics in Iraq and showing openness to work in a bipartisan way with the new Congress, the Democrats will now need to decide if they want to be part of the solution the likely electorate wants.

The ratings on President Bush and his work in office remain negative. On his name identification, forty-five percent (45%) of likely voters have a favorable view of him and fifty-three percent (53%) have an unfavorable view. However, partisan polarization is a cause of much of this slightly negative tilt. While eighty-five percent (85%) of Republicans approve of him, fully eighty-nine percent (89%) of Democrats disapprove. Among Independents, thirty-four percent (34%) are favorable and sixty-one percent (61%) are unfavorable, and remains the most likely target for improvement in the President's numbers.

A similar trend is seen on the job approval rating for the President. Forty-two percent (42%) of likely voters approve of his job performance and fifty-five percent (55%) disapprove. However, eighty percent (80%) of Republicans approve of his performance while ninety percent (90%) of Democrats disapprove. As with his image ratings, with Independents, the President's numbers are negative, the split is thirty-five percent (35%) approve and fifty-nine percent (59%) disapprove.

Continuing a trend seen throughout his Presidency, the personal approval rating remains high, with sixty-one percent (61%) of likely voters approving of him personally, a sign that the President has an opening to at some point move his image and job approval rating net positive. On this measurement, ninety-three percent (93%) of Republicans and fifty-six percent (56%) of Independents approve of him. The President continues to have a considerable amount of personal goodwill not only with his base Republican voters, but also with those key Independent voters.

The Republican Party – Image and Issue Handling

As one would expect in the wake of the 2006 elections, the image of Republicans in Congress (41% favorable/48% unfavorable) trails the image of Democrats in Congress (51% favorable/37% unfavorable). However, much of this difference is driven by the views of Independents who are twenty-points net negative on Congressional Republicans and fourteen-points net positive on Congressional Democrats. These Independent voters, who were twice as likely as Democratic voters to think the meaning of the election was an end to gridlock, could certainly shift rapidly if the leadership of the Congressional Democrats looks like more of the same.

In a similar trend, the Republican Party has precious few issues on which it enjoys a decisive advantage on issue handling. On terrorism (52%-35%) and moral values (44%-36%), the GOP is the clear choice of the likely electorate. On a few other issues, like taxes (47%-44%), the economy (43%-46%), illegal immigration (42%-38%), the likely electorate is still undecided about which party is best equipped to handle these issues.

On the remaining issues, Iraq (40%-48%), jobs (37%-51%), energy independence (29%-55%), prescription drugs (26%-61%), Social Security (32%-56%), health care (24%-63%), and corruption in Washington (28%-44%), the Republican Party has a notable disadvantage to the Democratic Party.

However, on any of these issue handling questions, there are two broader points. First, on many of these issues like health care and Social Security, the Republican Party has a traditional historic disadvantage that is certainly reflected in these numbers. Second, these disadvantages do not portend future doom for the Republican Party. Despite the disadvantages seen here on prescription drugs and health care, exit polls indicate the parties split the senior vote in the 2006 election.

In addition, the President can help improve the standing of the GOP on the corruption issue if he can effectively position himself as in favor of spending restraint on issues like earmarks and deficit spending while the Democratic leadership will be forced to try to arrange their caucus behind this self-sacrificing change in budget politics.

Indeed, while President Bush's personal image indicates that likely voters are willing to give him the benefit of the doubt about his intentions on new policies, for many voters, their first exposure to Speaker Pelosi and Majority Leader Reid will be their handling of these contentious issues. For Senator Reid (69% no image) and to a lesser extent Speaker Pelosi (32% no image), the next few months will be crucial in defining their image to the likely electorate which currently hover at about a one to one favorable-unfavorable ratio.

The Future As the Presidential Campaign Takes Shape

Looking at the 2008 Presidential Elections, the Republican Party has two strong and popular potential candidates – Rudy Giuliani (64% favorable/22% unfavorable) and John McCain (62% favorable/25% unfavorable). Both are at a 2.5 to 1 favorable/unfavorable ratio and both have strong images with Independents and in the Northeast, Midwest, and West – all demographics where the Republican Party has struggled in recent years.

In addition, Mitt Romney (22% favorable/13% unfavorable) has a slightly positive image with considerable room to grow with 46% of likely voters having never heard of him.

In contrast, while the presumptive front runner for the Democrats – Senator Hillary Clinton (51% favorable/46% unfavorable – 27% strongly favorable/35% strongly unfavorable) – does have a slightly positive image with a majority of the likely electorate, she also has a considerable number of likely voters already holding intensely negative views about her. In addition, her no image score is just 3%, so her challenge will be to convert opponents into supporters, rather than sell herself to uninformed voters.

Some of the other contenders like John Edwards (49% favorable/29% unfavorable) and Barack Obama (46% favorable/21% unfavorable) have name identification scores in line with Hillary Clinton's score, but trail her in popularity with Democrats. Also, both of them enjoy a 27% favorable rating from Republicans, which is likely to dissipate quickly in the heat of the 2008 race.

On the trial 2008 ballots, McCain and Giuliani have very similar numbers against both Hillary and Obama. Both Republicans run strong with Independents. The breakdown is:

- McCain (53%) versus H. Clinton (43%)
- McCain (51%) versus Obama (39%)
- Giuliani (53%) versus H. Clinton (43%)
- Giuliani (50%) versus Obama (41%).

Looking ahead, the GOP has a history of focusing very quickly on two candidates and a history of nominating the front runner. Either we are going to have a battle between the two five hundred pound gorillas, or Giuliani will not enter the race, making room for an alternative to McCain to get some traction. In that scenario, the person who seems to be building the organization, resources, and money to be the last man standing is Mitt Romney.

On the Democratic side, there is much more history of the primaries remaining focused longer on multiple candidates, making room for sleeper candidates to surface much later in the nomination process. Hillary Clinton certainly has everything going for her as the frontrunner for the Democratic nomination; the question over the next twelve months is whether Democratic primary voters will take pause when they see how polarizing she is with the general electorate. This data is certainly a cautionary indicator to national Democrats about the capacity of Senator Clinton to defeat either of the possible GOP candidates for President.

Conclusion

The 2008 Presidential Election will be the first election since 1952 that neither a president is running for re-election nor the President's Vice President is running to replace him. It is truly an "open seat" Presidential race and will certainly bring some new twists to the process, evidenced by the fact that the race for the nomination for both parties is starting earlier than ever.

Other areas of the presidential campaign will see a greater emphasis as well. While the “vision thing” is always a part of every presidential election, it promises to be even more so in the 2008 Presidential Election. With this being an “open seat,” look for both party nomination fights and the general election to be as much an election about the future as it is about the past.

Perhaps one of the indicators of this potentially being another close election built around the future is a question we asked about voters’ attitudes about our children’s future. When asked in our latest George Washington University Battleground about their children’s future, thirty-nine percent (39%) of voters feel their children will be better off than they are, thirty-seven percent (37%) felt their children would be worse off, and nineteen percent (19%) felt their children’s lives would be about the same. But unlike other questions where Republicans are at one end of the spectrum, Democratic voters at the other end of the spectrum, and Independent voters often averaging the norm - this question shows Republicans are a net fifteen-points positive about their children’s future, Democratic voters are a net three-points negative about their children’s future, and Independent voters are a net twenty-points negative about their children’s future.

In last year’s Congressional Elections, we saw the impact of a major shift in attitudes with Independent voters. It truly cost the Republican Party control of the U.S. House of Representatives and the U.S. Senate. When it comes to which party wins control of the White House in the 2008 election, it may very well come down to which party’s Presidential candidate can capture a majority from Independent voters. More specifically, victory may come to the candidate who can show they can shape a better future (America) in the lives of the children of those Independent voters.

It has been said that the American Dream is not about today, but that the American Dream is seeing our children’s and grandchildren’s lives improve spiritually, educationally, economically, and in their personal safety. While 9/11, the war on terror, and the Iraqi War have all served to make the path to that American Dream less clear, so has the partisan politics of the last fifteen years. Who knows, maybe with an “open seat” presidential race, especially one focused on “swing” Independent voters and focused on our children’s future, maybe we as a nation can regain the “American Dream” as a top priority as it was in 1952.