

# The Battleground 2006

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## Democratic Strategic Analysis

by Celinda Lake, Daniel Gotoff, and Erica Prosser

*Just over a month before the 2006 elections, Democrats are poised to make significant gains in both houses of Congress. Democrats currently hold an 8-point advantage on the generic Congressional ballot, up from 5-points in our last Battleground survey. The advantage is distinctly stronger in competitive Congressional districts.*

*Americans want change. They are strongly dissatisfied with the direction of the country, and increasingly holding President Bush and (finally) Republicans in Congress accountable. Iraq helped create the mood for change. The current sex scandals, which broke after this poll, only accentuate this desire for change and people who will be a check and balance on what is happening in Washington. Approval ratings for Congress are reaching near-historic lows. As Republican efforts to define the choice for voters are undermined by the reality of their policies both at home and overseas, Democrats' message of a new direction for the country is taking hold. The Democrats' strategy of nationalizing this election - forcing Republicans across the country to answer for their unquestioning allegiance to Bush and inability to affect positive change at home or aboard - is meeting with success. The President is now a liability in most districts and could determine the election in several.*

*While Americans have turned on Bush on the issue of Iraq - a war the public believes was not worth fighting - Democrats continue to have a double-digit deficit on safeguarding America from a terrorist threat. This remains a dangerous disadvantage in the current political atmosphere. In order to take back Congress in November, Democrats must extend the argument for change from Iraq to security, while capitalizing on their strong advantages on fighting for the American middle class. In the end, however, the strongest terrain for Democrats is the economy and domestic issues. That's where the last 30 days of the campaign should be fought. If is noticeable that most of the Republican attack ads are on taxes and immigration, not terrorism, to date.*

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## **THE MOOD OF THE ELECTORATE—FOCUSED AND UNHAPPY**

*Voters continue to be deeply concerned and pessimistic about the direction of the country.*

Sixty-two percent of likely voters say the country continues off on the wrong track, with more than half (51 percent) feeling this way strongly. This is particularly true of key target voters including those who live in competitive Congressional Districts (71 percent), independents (70 percent), and those who are undecided on the generic Congressional ballot (68 percent). When asked about their feelings on the direction of the country, the most common sentiment is concern (36 percent), followed by frustration (19 percent). Historically, this atmosphere is a harbinger of change and bodes well for Democrats in the mid-term elections.

*Voters are paying attention to the Congressional elections and are interested in them with an impressive intensity.*

Nearly two-thirds (62 percent) of voters say they are extremely likely to vote, including 58 percent of independents. Interest is piqued too -- 43 percent of voters say they are extremely interested in the Congressional elections (voters who rate their interest at 10 on a scale from 1 to 10), with another third (32 percent) expressing strong interest (7-9 on the scale). Interest is particularly strong among those in contested Congressional Districts (56 percent), in the contentious Northeast (50 percent), and in states with competitive Senate races (49 percent). Look for extra seat pick-ups where Senate races reinforce House races.

Interest among Democrats (73 percent interested, 45 percent extremely) and Republicans (76 percent interested, 42 percent extremely) are virtually equal, with independents expressing similar levels of interest (78 percent interested, 42 percent extremely). Intention to vote is fairly equal between parties as well with just over 60 percent of both Democrats (64 percent) and Republicans (63 percent) saying they are extremely likely to vote. Independents are slightly less enthused, but still have a strong majority (58 percent) who say they are extremely likely to vote. Turnout will be key for Democrats who traditionally are more easily discouraged from showing up at the polls. That trend could be reversed this cycle, however, with Republican voters becoming disaffected by the current scandals and choosing to stay home.

## **THE ELECTORAL CONTEXT—A POX ON ALL YOUR HOUSES, PARTICULARLY THE WHITE HOUSE**

*The President's job approval ratings continue to hover at a critical point, however a majority (52 percent) currently disapprove of the job he is doing and with extreme intensity (45 percent strongly disapprove).*

Forty-five percent of the electorate currently approve of the job Bush is doing. This rating falls on the cusp of what it would take to affect a tide for the party out of power.

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The Bush administration, no doubt, will spend the next month trying to increase the President's numbers a few critical points to avoid the "six year itch" that only Bill Clinton has been able to escape in recent history. Democrats conversely need to continue to make this election a referendum on Bush and to remind the public of their dissatisfaction with his job performance on Iraq and the direction of the country more generally. This is one of the most important numbers to watch. A presidential job approval below 40 percent virtually assures a Democratic victory.

While Bush has given voters plenty to be dissatisfied with, they are still split on their personal feelings about him. When asked if they personally approve of him 61 percent of voters say they do, with one-third (32 percent) saying they do not. However, when asked the more standard favorability measure, a majority (53 percent) of voters give the President an unfavorable rating, with more than four-in-ten (43 percent) giving him a strongly unfavorable rating, just 45 percent of Americans have a positive opinion of George W. Bush. Among those particularly unfavorable towards the President are key voting groups including independents (63 percent unfavorable, 50 percent strongly), undecided voters (55 percent unfavorable, 34 percent strongly), voters in competitive Congressional Districts (61 percent unfavorable, 50 percent strongly), and voters in states with competitive Senate races (54 percent unfavorable, 43 percent strongly), only his base of Republicans is propping him up. Intensity among voters who are favorable is more split with 25 percent, his core base, giving him a strongly favorable rating and 20 percent saying they are somewhat favorable.

*Just over one-third (35 percent) of voters say their vote in the mid-term elections is entirely a referendum on Bush and his policies. The data suggests Democrats should continue to make the election a referendum on Bush and the direction of the country and not allow Republicans to localize these elections.*

Even more troubling for the Republicans, the voters are extremely negative on the job performance of Congress. Just 31 percent approve and 62 percent disapprove (43 percent strongly disapprove), with key voter groups particularly negative—voters in competitive Senate states (65 percent disapprove), those in competitive Congressional Districts (70 percent), independents (69 percent), undecided voters (64 percent), and those who are most likely to vote (68 percent).

Voters do approve of the job their member of Congress is doing (61 percent approve. It is key to tie individual members to Washington and Bush. At the same time, among undecided voters only 41 percent approve of the job their member of Congress is doing and less than half (49 percent) of voters in competitive Congressional districts do.

*While voters have been equally dismissive of both parties in the months leading up to November, they are beginning to differentiate.*

A majority of voters hold a negative view of Republicans in Congress (51 percent unfavorable, 43 percent favorable) and a positive view of Democrats in Congress (52 percent favorable, 42 percent unfavorable). This suggests that Americans have started to

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recognize the detrimental consequences of the Republicans holding sole power in Washington—in Congress, the Senate, the White House, and the Supreme Court. A majority (52 percent) says the country is worse off than we were in 2002, with another fourth (24 percent) saying the country is about the same. When asked about their personal situations we see slightly more optimism, but one-third (32 percent) say they and their families are worse off since the Republicans took control of the agenda, while 41 percent say they are about the same.

Only one-fourth of voters, attributable to the core Republican base, say both the country (24 percent) and their families (27 percent) are better off. In competitive Congressional districts and among undecided voters the mood is even more negative. Only 7 percent of undecided voters think the country is getting better and 58 percent think it is getting worse. Looking at their family situation 15 percent say it is getting better and 38 percent say it is getting worse.

### **THE CONGRESSIONAL ELECTIONS—DEMOCRATS' OPPORTUNITY**

*Democrats have a continued advantage on the generic Congressional ballot (8-points), with a 30-point advantage in competitive Congressional Districts—now they must close the deal.*

Even employing a tight turnout model where party identification is even (42 percent Democrats and 42 percent Republicans), Democrats currently enjoy an 8-point advantage on the Congressional ballot (49 percent Democrat, 41 percent Republican, 10 percent undecided). Contrary to tradition, Democrats are also more energized and have solidified their voters earlier and better than Republicans. Ninety-two percent of Democrats say they will vote for the Congressional Democrat while 84 percent of Republicans say they will vote for the Republican. Another distinction this cycle is that voters across the spectrum of vote likelihood all favor the Democratic candidate—including the most likely 40 percent of voters (5-points).

The overall Democratic advantage comes from growing support among independents—Democrats enjoy an 18-point lead with independent voters. Democrats also hold distinct advantages among targeted voter groups, including those that consider themselves moderates (45-points), voters in competitive Congressional Districts (30-points), those in the Northeast (24-points) and Midwest (19-points), seniors (17-points), women (13-points), and voters in Congressional Districts where neither Bush nor Kerry received more than 55 percent of the vote (12-points).

The Democratic candidate holds a slight lead with rural voters (7-points), married women (5-points), voters in the South (4-points), and men (2-points)—all groups that Republicans have relied on in recent elections.

**Undecided voters on the generic Congressional ballot make up 10 percent of the electorate.** Those most likely to be undecided include voters in the West (15 percent), those in competitive Congressional Districts (13 percent), Latino voters (21 percent),

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independents (27 percent), and moderates (25 percent)—all groups that lean toward the Democratic candidate overall.

Unfortunately for the Democrats, the ‘generic’ candidate is not running in any district and each contested race must be won by beating known incumbents. And, while voters are not happy with the job of the President or Congress overall, they are more approving of their own member of Congress—a factor on which the Republican’s will surely try to capitalize. More than six-in-ten (61 percent) voters give their own member of Congress positive job performance ratings, with just over one-fourth (29 percent) saying they disapprove of their own member’s job performance.

Likewise more than half (53 percent) currently says their vote for Congress will be based on whether their own representative deserves re-election. As the election nears, individual Republican incumbents in tough races will try their best to keep voters from focusing on the larger context of Washington and the direction of the U.S. Bush is an animating figure for voters who desire change, as 40 percent of those who are voting for the Democratic candidate say their votes are a vote against the President and 33 percent say they are votes against the Republican candidate as opposed to for the specific Democratic candidate. Conversely, the Republican candidate voters are voting for their specific candidate (73 percent) and not as a protest against the Democratic candidate (18 percent).

#### **DEMOCRATS AND REPUBLICANS ON THE ISSUES**

*Democrats have strong advantages on dealing with health care, making prescription drugs affordable, improving the economy, strengthening Social Security, and energy independence. Democrats also hold an advantage on creating jobs. Republicans continue to have the advantage on safeguarding America from a terrorist threat, as well as on taxes, immigration, and protecting moral values.*

*Voters are split on who will be better with dealing with Iraq and give Democrats a stronger advantage on cracking down on corruption in Washington.*

<i>CONGRESSIONAL DEMOCRATS VS REPUBLICANS</i>			
	<i>Democrats Better</i>	<i>Republicans Better</i>	<i>Dem-GOP</i>
<i>Making prescription drugs affordable</i>	61%	26%	+35
<i>Dealing with healthcare</i>	59%	29%	+30
<i>Strengthening Social Security</i>	57%	31%	+26
<i>Energy independence</i>	53%	33%	+14
<i>Cracking down on corruption in Washington</i>	41%	30%	+10
<i>Improving the economy</i>	51%	42%	+9
<i>Creating jobs</i>	49%	41%	+8
<i>Dealing with Iraq</i>	46%	44%	+2
<i>Dealing with illegal immigration</i>	37%	44%	-7
<i>Holding the line on taxes</i>	41%	49%	-8
<i>Protecting moral values</i>	36%	48%	-12
<i>Safeguarding America from a terrorist threat</i>	35%	51%	-16

Ironically, both Democrats and Republicans in various races are trying to focus the agenda on the war. While Republicans historically hold an advantage on these issues, weary voters are looking to Democrats this cycle—no doubt both as agents of change and as a protest against Bush and the Administration’s policy on the war. Voters’ change in mood is evident even from earlier this year when they Republicans a 3-point advantage on dealing with Iraq, and now give Democrats a 2-point advantage on the measure.

However, Republicans do not have much room to move to a domestic agenda focus, as Democrats hold strong advantages on the top-of-mind issues in this arena as well. And have improved their advantage on a number of these issues since the last midterm elections in 2002, including on strengthening Social Security (16-point advantage in 2002 to 26-point advantage now), dealing with healthcare (23-point advantage to a 30-point advantage), and improving the economy (2-point disadvantage to a 9-point advantage). Democrats must be prepared for Republicans to continue their current assault on taxes in competitive races—one issue where they consistently and still hold an advantage in voters’ minds.

*Bush and the Congressional Republicans hold advantages on the same issues over Congressional Democrats, though unlike in the past, Bush’s advantages are not particularly stronger than the Congressional Republicans.*

Though the margins are diminished, Bush continues to hold advantages over Democrats on safeguarding America from terrorism (12-point margin) and protecting moral values (11-point margin). However, his advantage on terrorism has greatly diminished since the last midterms just post 9/11 when he held a 53-point advantage over the Democrats. Currently, he also has an advantage on providing strong leadership (4-points), which is meager given his role as chief executive.

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Congressional Democrats hold strong leads over Bush on health care (32-point Democratic margin), energy independence (23-point Democratic margin), creating jobs (15-points), , and improving the economy (12-point Democratic margin). Voters are more divided on dealing with Iraq and immigration, leaning Democratic, though within the margin of error (+2 and +3 respectively). Similar to the Congressional Republicans comparison, Congressional Democrats have improved their advantages over Bush since 2002 including on the key issues of health care (11-point advantage in 2002), and improving the economy (12-point disadvantage in 2002).

*The war in Iraq—Making Bush's albatross weigh in Congressional races*

The country has turned against Bush on the war in Iraq. We have seen trust in him on the issue decline as questions about his handling of the war and motivation for invading Iraq are raised daily. As the country grows wearier of the conflict and the limited prospects of a quick or successful ending, many Congressional Republicans are trying to distance themselves from Bush on the issue. Democrats, who currently hold a 17-point advantage over Congressional Republicans and a 21-point advantage over Bush on Iraq among voters in contested Congressional Districts, must not allow this separation, as the war continues to be the determining issue in most of these mid-term races.

Voters are motivated by the war and say it is the issue most likely to determine their vote for Congress (10 percent). The recently leaked nationally intelligence report only feeds voters' doubts about staying Bush's course. Democrats simply must make this a national issue that includes individual Congressional members in order to be successful in November. They must also use this debate to improve their standing on security and terrorism—a glaring disadvantage a month before Election Day.

A majority (51 percent) of voters has reached the point that they do not believe the war in Iraq is worth fighting anymore, and they believe this with growing intensity (42 percent strongly). Just one-third (33 percent) of voters strongly believes the war has been worth fighting for, with another 12 percent somewhat agreeing. These numbers are no doubt directly linked to the fact that fewer than half (49 percent) of the electorate now strongly agree the war in Iraq is part of the global war on terror.

The timeline for troop withdrawal has continued to be an issue in many races. Voters remain split on whether the U.S. should keep troops in Iraq until the situation is stable no matter how long that takes (49 percent) or whether a plan to bring them home should be put in place (49 percent) -- either immediately (21 percent) or on a 2-year timeline (28 percent). In fact, more than six-in-ten (61 percent) voters who favor withdrawal do so even if it means the possibility that insurgent forces would seize control of the country.

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## **KEY BATTLEGROUND FOR THE MID-TERM ELECTIONS**

### **THE GENDER GAP**

The Democratic advantage has come both from pulling even among men and maintaining a strong advantage among women.

Women are currently 5-points Democratic in their party identification and men are 5-points Republican. However both men and women are supporting the Democratic candidate, performing 6- and 5-points over party identification for the Democrat respectively. Men currently vote 46 percent Democrat and 44 percent Republican with 11 percent undecided, while women vote 51 percent Democrat and 38 percent Republican with 10 percent undecided.

Support among women is strong across the board, with the obvious exception of hard-core Republican women and base groups. The Democratic candidate holds particularly strong advantages among African American women (87-points), Latino women (30-points), independent women (27-points), and unmarried women (25-points). These are key constituents for turnout in the mid-term elections. However, the male counterparts of all of these voter groups are supporting the Democrat as well.

Women are particularly negative on the direction of the country (26 percent right direction, 67 percent wrong direction), as well as expressing stronger than overall concern about where the country is headed (39 percent). They also are more unfavorable towards the President (57 percent) than the electorate overall (53 percent), suggesting that connecting Republican candidates to Bush will work particularly well among women. Similarly messages on Iraq look to be strong with this voter bloc—women give Congressional Democrats a 10-point advantage on the issue over their Republican counterparts, and a majority of 56 percent favor a plan for withdrawal of troops from Iraq either immediately (24 percent) or on a timeline of no more than two years (32 percent).

Unlike in the last election where “security moms” were the focus, women are not voting the terrorism issue this time around. While they give Republicans a 9-point advantage on the issue this does not predict their vote. In fact, they give Democrats a 15-point advantage over Congressional Republicans on dealing with the issue that is most important to them.

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## **MARRIAGE GAP**

More evident than the gender gap is the marriage gap. Married voters are 7-points Republican in party identification, while unmarried voters are 22-points Democratic. Married voters, however, split on the Congressional ballot (45 percent Democrat, 45 percent Republican), under-performing party identification while unmarried voters over-perform party identification voting 35-points Democratic (27 percent Republican, 62 percent Democrat).

## **RURAL VOTERS**

One battleground that has to be of concern to Republicans is rural voters, a traditional base for their candidates. Rural voters are currently 2-points Republican in their party identification (44 percent Republican, 42 percent Democrat), however they are currently voting 7-points Democratic.

This traditional core base for Bush is now split on their feelings about him with a majority (51 percent) saying they view him unfavorably and 51 percent disapprove of the job he is doing. Among rural voters supporting the Democrat 42 percent say their vote is one against the President.

They are even more dissatisfied with the job Congress is doing, mirroring overall electorate numbers, 60 percent disapprove of Congress' job performance, however this improves when looking at their individual members with just 23 percent disapproving. However half of all rural voters say the country is worse off than it was before Republicans seized sole control in Washington with another fourth (23 percent) saying it is about the same.

Rural voters are looking to Democrats on the issues they care about most too, 52 percent say the Democrats in Congress would do a better job on their most important issue. They give Democrats strong advantages on a host of top-of-mind issues including making prescription drugs affordable (+37), dealing with health care (+26), strengthening Social Security (+25), energy independence (+13), improving the economy (+11), creating jobs (+11), and cracking down on corruption in Washington (+10).