

George Washington University Battleground 2006
Republican Strategic Analysis

By Ed Goeas

Inside every campaign strategically, one must ask themselves, “Do I have to run a better campaign than my opponent to win, can I win by running an equal campaign, or can I win with a lesser campaign?” With five weeks to go in the 2006 election, the answer to that question is, “Republicans (incumbents and challengers alike) definitely have to run a better campaign than their Democratic opponents in order to win.” The political environment is certainly a hindrance for Republicans in almost every campaign, and voters are much more resistant to hearing Republicans’ side of the story.

At the same time, five weeks, especially the last five weeks, can be a lifetime in a political campaign. In fact, in most of the targeted races, nearly two-thirds of the resources are yet to be spent (at least on the Republican side of the equation). Then there is also the ground game, which, in recent years Republicans have not only caught up with Democrats’ tactical advantage in this area, but surpassed the Democrats’ ground game. That does not minimize, however, the fact that Republicans are swimming against the current, and can expect to continue to be swimming up-stream for the remainder of the 2006 campaign.

The key question going into this final phase of the 2006 elections is, “who is going to vote?” In an election where traditionally thirty-five percent of adults eighteen and over cast their vote (approximately 50% of registered voters) – the mix of voters casting their vote can be dramatically different than what the overall polling numbers may reflect. There are two measurements that we as political pollsters watch in the internal data throughout the campaign. One is vote intensity and the other is intensity of party loyalty.

Vote intensity is measured from several questions that explore how intense voters are about voting, and is used in our vote modeling along with age and education (which are key determinants to voter turnout). What is surprising in this most recent Battleground survey is that in recent weeks, Democratic voters have caught up with Republican voters in vote intensity. In most campaigns this does not occur until the final week of the campaign, primarily because minority voters traditionally engage very late in the campaign. Currently, African-American and Hispanic voters are as engaged as their White voter counterparts.

Intensity of party loyalty is measured by looking at Republican voters and seeing if they support Republican candidates as intensely as Democratic voters are supporting Democrat candidates. (This is especially important in non-presidential elections when most Independent voters do not participate.) It is on these measurements that Republicans have been playing catch-up throughout most of the spring and summer, and

had shown some real progress post-Labor Day, only to see Democratic voters jump in intensity over the last week. Currently, Democrats hold about an eight point advantage in this area.

On one hand, the internal data is much more encouraging than the overall data for Republicans. Because Republicans are receiving stronger support from more educated voters and Democratic support is being driven by voters under the age of thirty-five, vote models on the generic ballot show the Democrat vote shrinking from an eight-point (41% Republican – 49% Democratic) lead to a four-point lead (43% Republican – 47% Democratic).

You also see a lot of wasted Democratic vote reflected in the national generic ballot because of heavier concentrations of Democratic voters in the high minority population Congressional Districts. In the Republican held Congressional Districts the generic ballot is even (45% Republican – 45% Democratic), and in the Democratic held Congressional Districts the Democrat candidate leads on the generic ballot by twenty-one-points (34% Republican – 55% Democratic). The same factor comes into play with the Senate campaigns. In the two Republican Senator states, Republicans have a one-point lead (46% Republican – 45% Democrat), in the split delegation states Democrats have a three-point lead (42% Republican – 45% Democratic), and in the two Democratic Senator states, Democrats have a nineteen point lead (35% Republican – 54% Democratic).

On the other hand, that may be where the good news ends. When looking at the latest data cut by the twelve most competitive Senate races (PA, MT, OH, RI, MO, NJ, TN, MD, VA, WA, AZ, and MN – states combining for about 1.5 million voter registration edge for the Democrats), Democrats lead on the generic ballot by only four-points (42% Republican – 46% Democratic). However, in the forty-three house districts (that fall in the September 1st Cook Report's lean or toss-up categories), Republicans trail the Democratic candidate on the generic ballot by thirty-points (29% Republican – 59% Democratic). Even though the House target list is a small sample (11% for the House target list – 27% for the Senate target list), the results still underscore the tough political environment for the House Republicans where so many of their vulnerable seats are – in the Northeast and Midwest – two regions of the country where Republicans are facing their roughest terrain.

Yes, five weeks can be a lifetime in a political campaign and Republicans certainly have a great deal of fight left in them. But based on this latest Battleground 2006 survey data, one has to believe that Democrats have a better than even chance of winning control of the U.S. House of Representatives, and if the political environment continues to deteriorate for Republicans, control of the Senate is also at risk.

Voting for or against George Bush and the Republicans – Congressional Voting Influences

Following the generic ballot, likely voters were asked the driving force behind their vote. Those selecting the Republican candidate were asked if their vote is more of a vote in favor of the Republican candidate or against the Democratic candidate. Overall, seventy-three percent (73%) of generic Republican voters say their vote is in favor of the Republican candidate. Just eighteen percent (18%) indicate their vote is against the Democratic candidate.

This solidification of affirmative support among generic Republican voters crosses all notable demographic lines, with the vote in favor of the Republican candidate at sixty percent (60%) or above with every notable demographic group, with the exception of Independents. Among Independents, “in favor of the Republican candidate” stands at fifty-five percent (55%) while “against the Democratic candidate” stands at twenty-four percent (24%).

Those selecting the Democratic candidate were split into two groups. The first was asked if their vote is more of a vote in favor of the Democratic candidate or against the Republican candidate. For this group, fifty-eight percent (58%) say their vote is in favor of the Democratic candidate. Another thirty-two percent (32%) indicate their vote is against the Republican candidate. Of particular concern for Republicans in this data is the solidification of affirmative support for the Democratic candidate in contested Congressional Districts. Among voters in contested Congressional Districts, affirmative support for the Democratic candidate stands at sixty-five percent (65%).

The second group of generic Democratic voters was asked if their vote is more of a vote in favor of the Democratic candidate or against President Bush. A majority (52%) of this group says their vote is in favor of the Democratic candidate. However, another forty percent (40%) say their vote is against President Bush.

The internals on this data mirror those for the Democrats versus Republican question. Fully fifty-seven percent (57%) of likely voters in contested Congressional Districts say their vote is “in favor of the Democratic candidate”. In addition, also mirroring a trend seen on the other split, fifty-three percent (53%) of Independent voters says their vote is a vote “against Bush.”

These two trends – a solidification of pro-Democratic support in contested Congressional Districts and an anti-Republican/anti-Bush sentiment amongst Independents – are very troubling for the GOP. If Democrats can maintain their intensity among their partisans and motivate Independents via emotion to vote against the Republicans, this could be a powerful coalition for the Democrats to “change the mix” of who turns out to vote in this non-presidential year election. A change that could well tip the election to the Democrats’ favor in most key Congressional races.

However, there are mixed signals on this trend. On the very next question, all likely voters were asked if they think of the upcoming Congressional election as a vote for whether or not to continue the policies of President Bush or a vote on whether or not their Member of Congress deserves re-election. When asked this way, a majority (53%) of likely voters say that this is a vote on whether their Member of Congress deserves re-election, while just thirty-five percent (35%) identify this election as a referendum on Bush policies. Overall, fifty-nine percent (59%) of Democrats, fifty-four percent (54%) of Independents, fifty-two percent (52%) of liberals, and fifty-three percent (53%) of African Americans identify this as an election about whether or not their Member of Congress deserves re-election. In addition, fifty percent (50%) of those in competitive Congressional Districts and fifty-four percent (54%) of those in competitive U.S. Senate states also respond that their vote is a judgment on re-election of their incumbent not a referendum on Bush policies.

In fact, those driving the view that this is a referendum on Bush policies are not Democratic partisans or angry Independents, but rather stalwart Republican supporters defending the President. The notable groups driving the referendum group include Republicans (42%), very conservative voters (42%), white conservative Christians (43%), those who select the GOP on the generic ballot (44%), and those who consistently approve of President Bush (44%).

These responses illustrate that while those already supporting Democratic candidates for Congress may be solidifying their partisan views or tapping into dissatisfaction of the status quo with Independent voters, the majority of the overall electorate has not yet embraced the view that this election is a referendum on the policies of the Bush administration.

The War on Terrorism and the War in Iraq

Even in light of other declining numbers, the one area that the President has been extremely effective in recent weeks is in reinforcing his Administration's position on the War on Terrorism and the War in Iraq. Even though the country has shown signs of becoming "war weary," voters are now fairly evenly split on whether the war in Iraq was worth fighting – with forty-five percent (45%) responding that the war was "worth fighting," and fifty-one percent (51%) responding that the war was "not worth fighting."

On this question you see the partisan intensity almost even with seventy-six percent (76%) of Republicans saying the war was worth fighting and seventy-eight percent (78%) of Democratic voters saying the war was not worth fighting. There is some gender bias to the results, in that men are about six-points more likely to say that the war was worth fighting, while women are seventeen-points more likely to say that the war was not worth fighting. However, race is much more of a decisive factor. White voters are about evenly split (net two-points believe the war was worth fighting), while African-Americans are a net forty-nine-points negative about the war and Hispanics are a net thirty-seven-points negative about the war. Realistically, it is hard to sort through the

results of this question to tell how much is driven by partisanship, how much is driven by weariness of the war, and how much is driven by support for or against the war in Iraq.

More importantly, George Bush does seem to be winning some of the core arguments over the war in Iraq. Fifty-seven percent (49% strongly) of the American electorate believe that the war in Iraq is “part of the Global war on terror,” and seventy-two percent (72%) of those voters believe that it is a “major” part of the global war on terror. Not only do an overwhelming majority of White voters agree with those positions, but a majority of Hispanic voters also agree with President Bush’s position.

When looking at our Nation’s future role in Iraq, President Bush is also working from a position of strength. When asked about the future role of American troops in Iraq, forty-nine percent (49%) said “stay until the nation is confirmed to be stable,” twenty-eight percent (28%) said “set a date certain for withdrawal,” and twenty-one percent (21%) believe that we should “withdraw troops immediately.” If anything, this question reflects the split in the Democratic Party on the issue of Iraq. While seventy-eight percent (78%) of Republicans believe that we should stay until the job is done, Democratic voters are split with thirty-four percent (34%) wanting immediate withdrawal, forty percent (40%) wanting a date certain and twenty-three percent (23%) believing the troops should remain until Iraq is stable.

When pushed, voters who favor staying until the job is done also prove to be more firm in their position. Voters in favor of keeping troops in Iraq until the situation is declared stable were posed with the proposition that doing so would mean that we had fewer troops to deal with other threats across the globe. Seventy-five percent (75%) of those voters still favored keeping our troops in Iraq. When the voters who either wanted to set a date certain or wanted an immediate withdrawal were posed with the proposition that withdrawing troops would mean that insurgents would seize control of Iraq, slightly less, sixty-one percent (61%), maintained their position on the troops.

Clearly, when comparing other public polls to this latest data from the Battleground Poll, the President has solidified his position with many voters on both the war on terrorism and the war in Iraq.

Issue Handling

The issue handling section makes it clear that Republicans must attempt to focus the upcoming Congressional election on terrorism, moral values, and taxes. Among the issues tested, these are the only ones in which Congressional Republicans enjoy an advantage outside the margin of error. This trend includes significant disadvantages on issues that the Republican Congress has notable achievements like energy independence (twenty-point deficit to Congressional Democrats) and making prescription drugs affordable (thirty-five-point deficit to Congressional Democrats).

Despite the negative environment for the Republican Party, the Democrats have made gains outside the margin of error on only a few issues. Since the February Battleground, the Democrats in Congress versus the Republicans in Congress have only made gains outside the margin of error on the issues of Iraq (+4%) and taxes (+5%) while against President Bush they have only made gains on the issue of healthcare (+5%). In addition, these gains come from the undecided categories, not from decreases in confidence for Republicans in Congress or for President Bush. So, while the national trend is certainly a drag on Republicans, it has not yet had a significant impact on issue handling judgments of likely voters – the issue handling strengths and weaknesses of the two parties remain largely unchanged.

However, this concerning trend continues on follow-up questions to the most important issue question. Following this question, likely voters were asked if they believe that President Bush or the Democrats would do a better job at solving this problem. Overall, a majority (51%) of likely voters select the Democrats and thirty-six percent (36%) select President Bush. There is the expected partisan divide on this question with seventy-three percent (73%) of Republicans selecting President Bush and ninety percent (90%) of Democrats selecting the Democrats. (This was one of the starkest differences of the survey between Republican intensity for Republicans and Democrat intensity for Democrats).

It is the views of potential swing voters that are a significant cause for concern. Among those living in contested Congressional Districts, fifty-seven percent (57%) select the Democrats and just twenty-nine percent (29%) select President Bush. Among those living in contested U.S. Senate states, fifty-one percent (51%) select the Democrats and just thirty-five percent (35%) select President Bush. There is an equally troubling trend among Independents (56% for the Democrats – 21% for Bush).

All likely voters were also asked if they believe that the Republicans in Congress or the Democrats in Congress will do a better job at solving their top problem. On this version, forty-six percent (46%) select the Democrats and thirty-eight percent (38%) select the Republicans – an eight-point deficit rather than the fifteen-point deficit for President Bush. This question was also closer for Republicans on partisanship – seventy-nine percent (79%) of Republicans select Congressional Republicans and eighty-six percent (86%) of Democrats select Congressional Democrats. Independent voter support of Congressional Democrats drops once President Bush is taken out of the equation from fifty-six percent (56%) to forty-three percent (43%), but not to the benefit of Congressional Republican gains – just 22% select the Republicans.

Overall, these questions illustrate that the Democrats possess an advantage on many of the key issues in this election. However, on the critical issues of terrorism, moral values, and taxes, it is the Republicans that hold the advantage. It would be quite valuable for Republican candidates and leaders to focus the electoral debate on these critical issues to take advantage of the generic advantage Republicans enjoy on these issues.

Conclusion

Once again, there are five weeks left in the 2006 elections, with the bulk of the campaigns' resources yet to be spent, and a lot can happen in five weeks – that is reality! At the same time, there is no way to sugarcoat the negative numbers for Republicans in this latest Battleground Poll – that is also reality. The political environment hangs like a yoke around the neck of every Republican candidate in the country. Some will plow through, some will fall by the wayside. In truth, whichever reality plays out between now and November 7th now lies in the hands of the individual campaigns, district by district, state by state.

Can an event like what we have witnessed the last few days surrounding ex-Congressman Foley become the centerpiece of how people vote? That is unlikely! For Democratic voters it just becomes another in the long list of why they hate George Bush and the Republicans. The bigger impact may be on whether people vote. Is this the last straw that drives Independent voters who usually don't vote in non-presidential elections to vote in this election? Does this "Washington scandal" dissuade Republican voters from making the effort to vote in this election? The answer to those two questions is potentially, "yes."

There will, however, be other such events in the final five weeks. We saw President Clinton, red faced and pointing on Fox TV, entertaining the Republicans but meanwhile not adding one vote to the Republican column. Meanwhile, in our polling numbers we saw Democratic voter intensity and loyalty jump nine-points from a Tarrance Group survey the week before.

There will be other such events. That and the fact that a superior "ground game" can add two to three points to a campaign's margin. The bottom line, however, is that you have to keep the margin close to take advantage of events, or an even better ground game. The only way to do that is with a winning message and strategy.

As was stated in the introduction, Republicans have to run a better campaign this year to win. Voters may be war weary, may not see the improvements in the economy because they are too worried about the future, or may not feel in the middle of all this that their major concern is being addressed. In this environment it is easier for voters to scream with alarm than point with pride. All that is certainly understandable from a polling standpoint. If Republicans allow this to be a referendum on their governance, they will surely lose. If Republicans make this a choice, a choice between what we stand for and where the Democrats really want to take this country, then there is still enough time and resources to overcome the political environment and make this an interesting election.