

The Battleground 2008

July 27, 2008

Republican Strategic Analysis

by Brian C. Tringali

In 2006, voters put control of the U.S. Congress back in the hands of the Democrat Party after just 10 short years. Voters were growing unhappy with a lot of things at the time and certainly the War in Iraq contributed. But this latest survey of voters across the country (Battleground XXXII), suggests the changing of Congressional leadership has done little to stem that tide.

Today voters are even more negative about the direction the country is taking. Perhaps most importantly a plurality of American voters now think in the future their children will be worse off than they themselves are right now. The President's approval rating is still low, but few would have predicted last January that the Congress as an institution would be facing its lowest approval levels in history.

The reason that voters tell us they are upset with the Democrat Congress is that they view it as having given in to the President on the War in Iraq and that Congress has not gotten anything done. These are top reasons for Democrats themselves, although others are also likely to blame the Democrats ties to lobbyists and special interests.

In her strategic analysis last January, Celinda Lake (our partner in the George Washington University Battleground Survey) challenged Democrats to seize "the opportunity – and need – for Democrats to continue to define their brand of leadership" as they came away from the 2006 congressional elections having captured the U.S. Congress. She went on to warn her party that the American electorate was expecting Congressional Democrats to be a catalyst for change. Democrats seem to have missed their opportunity.

Congressional Democrats may have enjoyed the shortest of honeymoon periods. A majority of voters *disapprove* of their job performance after the first six months. More voters are now *unfavorable* than favorable toward both Democrat House Speaker Nancy Pelosi and Democrat Senate Leader Harry Reid.

Congressional leaders are almost out of time to influence the American electorate as attention will soon turn nearly completely to the presidential candidates and their campaigns in the months ahead. It is little wonder that voters have moved to focusing on the 2008 presidential elections, where they might find some hope for the future.

There is evidence in this survey that the days of voters' dualistic view where they love their Congressman but hate the Congress may be coming to an end. About two-thirds of

voters still have a favorable view toward their Congressperson and state representatives, but something has changed. Almost every voter thinks that lawmakers in Washington put partisan politics ahead of the voters, but now 71% think that their own Member of Congress puts partisan politics first.

A new era of cynicism may be dawning among voters. But that may suggest a tougher time for incumbents of both parties in 2008. The good news for Republicans is that there are now fewer of them that need protecting. It is probably tougher for both parties to recruit candidates in this political environment. But, as Charlie Cook put it after the Republican takeover of Congress back in 1994 (which may apply to this last election), "...in a Tsunami, a lot of crap washes up on the beach."

Focus on the presidential election has never come earlier. Many in the press and voters too have sought to move beyond our current entanglements and look to the future. But if the Democrats were hoping that their takeover of Congress would somehow give them a lift toward the 2008 presidential campaign, they must be disappointed.

This latest survey suggests that Rudy Giuliani remains the most electable candidate for Republicans – even if Fred Thompson decides to get into the race. On the Democrat side, Barack Obama is the more formidable in the general election. It is clear that Obama has captured the imagination of many voters – particularly among young people. Obama has surged in terms of his awareness level and remains a lot more favorably viewed than Hillary Clinton.

Voter Concerns

Perhaps the most shocking result of the Battleground survey is revealed in its first question. Seventy-percent (70%) of voters across the nation are now convinced that the country is off on the wrong track – and 58% of them feel strongly about it. This is certainly the lowest score recorded in the history of the Battleground survey. Democrats are universally agreed about this point, but so are 71% of Independents and 49% of Republicans.

The reasons for this are revealed in what voters report as their biggest concerns in open-ended questioning. The American electorate remains singularly focused on the War in Iraq, which was reflected in the survey six months ago.

Nearly a third of voters are concerned about either the War in Iraq (23%) or terrorism and national defense (6%). The issue is largest among those who reside in a presidential battleground congressional district from 2004, as well as among young people, minorities, Democrats and Catholics. But even among Republicans, this is the second most important issue (just behind immigration).

While concern about the War in Iraq remains high among voters, concern about terrorism and homeland security seem to have waned slightly.

Historically, the direction of the country tends to be determined by voter views of the economy. This was certainly true during the Clinton years. But only 19% of voters mention pocketbook concerns like the economy & taxes (11%), unemployment & jobs (4%) and energy costs (4%).

But it would be wrong to suggest that no one is concerned about pocketbook issues. African American voters, although concerned about the War and terrorism (30%), are actually more concerned about pocketbook considerations (38%).

Health care remains a big concern for voters – something that has not waned since the previous survey. Concern about health care is less a function of age and more a function of ideology, as moderate-to-liberal Democrats are a lot more likely to mention the issue.

Number One Problem

	<u>Jan.</u> %	<u>July</u> %
War in Iraq/terrorism	37	29
Pocketbook concerns	20	19
Health care	13	12
Immigration	14	10

Voters are not only convinced that the country is off on the wrong track at record levels, but they also now feel that their children will be worse off in the future than they themselves are today. Pluralities of voters (38%) feel that their children will be worse off in the future. Just 32% of American voters think their own children will be better off than they are right now – a drop of 7-points since January.

Those most likely to be negative about the future for their children include white women, rural residents, older women, Baptists and Democrats.

It would be hard to overemphasize the important of the change in this question among American voters. Many have written about the death of the American dream. Certainly this question reflects a major shift in the American psyche.

A New Cynicism

One has to wonder how these negative feelings are translating to voters' views of those they have elected to public office. This latest survey seems to suggest that these negative views are finally beginning to impact how voters view their own representatives.

Early in the survey, respondents were given an opportunity to review a few statements about elected officials in general. A 55% majority *disagree* with the statement that "most elected officials are basically trustworthy." Young people, African Americans and conservative Democrats are among those who are most likely to disagree.

American voters are split (48% agree/50% disagree) about whether "most elected officials are trying their best to find solutions to our nation's problems." Those most likely to *disagree* tend to be those who reside in the most competitive congressional districts (about 12% of the country). They also tend to be male, Republican and moderate.

Yet 72% of the American electorate feels that "voting gives people like me some say about how the government runs things." So there remains a fundamental belief in Democracy itself, if not in its elected representatives.

Does this translate to individual Members of Congress? The answer seems to be that perhaps not completely yet, but it may finally be starting to do so.

Two-thirds of voters continue to have a favorable view of both their Member of Congress and their representatives in the state legislature. But that does not translate to politicians in general.

Just 43% of voters have a favorable view of politicians in general, while a 53% majority of voters hold an unfavorable view. Those with the most negative view of politicians in general tend to be those who reside in competitive congressional districts, working men, younger men, white men, Republicans, college graduates, married men, white conservative Christians and those with no church affiliation.

Respondents were asked to pick between qualities that a Member of Congress might possess. By a two-to-one margin (64% to 32%) voters prefer a Member with a "willingness to find practical, workable solutions" over one with "strength of values and convictions." Those most likely to prefer "practical, workable solutions" include those who reside in the most competitive congressional districts and Democrats, but even a majority of Republicans agree.

Compare that to the fact that 93% of voters feel that lawmakers in Washington put partisan politics first compared with them. But the biggest shift in voter opinion may be revealed in the fact that 71% think *their own Member of Congress* puts partisan politics first compared with them. Further, 63% feel strongly that their own Member puts partisan politics first.

Who Comes First?

	<u>You</u> %	<u>Partisan Politics</u> %
Lawmakers in Washington	4	93
Your Member of Congress	19	71

This is real evidence that the incumbency advantage that has existed so long for elected officials may be beginning to change. The days of voters' dualistic view where they love their Congressman but hate the Congress may be coming to an end. It seems unlikely that they could hate the institution any more than they already do.

The War in Iraq

Earlier we reviewed the fact that more voters are focused on the War in Iraq than any other concern. In January, 25% mentioned the War in Iraq directly as their top concern and 23% mentioned it in this latest survey. All other specific mentions are not even close to that figure.

A simple majority (53%) feel that the War in Iraq has not been worth fighting, while 43% think it has been worth fighting. As recorded by the Washington Post, this figure has shifted dramatically since the start of the war if not lately. A recent USA Today poll showed that 55% of Americans want to give General Petraeus and the recent surge strategy until September to see if it has been successful. So while these figures have been relatively steady of late, they could shift dramatically in the near future.

	War In Iraq	
	<u>Worth Fighting</u> %	<u>Not Worth Fighting</u> %
September 2006	45	51
January 2007	46	48
July 2007	43	53

Perhaps because of the role the Democrats have already failed to play, voters are more likely to believe that Republicans in Congress can have more of an influence over the

War in Iraq than they are to believe that Congressional Democrats can play a role. Only 35% of voters think that Congressional Democrats can have a lot of influence on the War in Iraq, while another 36% think they can have some. But Congressional Republicans are not far ahead, as 41% think that they can have a lot of influence on the War in Iraq and 35% think they can have some influence.

The word of warning here is that if voters' believe that you can have an influence today then they are likely to believe that you may bear some responsibility in the future. But as we will see, voter complaints about Congressional Democrats in part center around the view that they have not had an influence on the War in Iraq. This criticism is actually more likely to come from their own party membership.

The President's ratings are tied closely with the public's view of the War in Iraq. President Bush's job approval has dropped to 36% approval and 61% disapproval. It is important to remember, particularly through the primary season, that 68% of Republicans still approve of the President's performance in office.

Among Democrats, of course, 91% disapprove of Bush's performance in office. Most importantly, when we get to the general election next year, 66% of Independents disapprove of Bush's performance and only 26% approve. This is likely to impact how even Republican candidates refer to the President when it comes to the general election.

During the Clinton years, the President's job performance was closely tied to the economy. Even though voters did not necessarily approve of President Clinton at a personal level, they continued to give him positive job ratings.

By comparison, Bush's personal ratings have come down, but they remain positive. Fifty-seven percent (57%) of voters approve of the President as a person, while 35% disapprove. Personal *disapprove* for the President drops to 59% among Democrat voters and only 39% among Independents.

Ronald Reagan had a similar disparity between his job performance and personal feeling toward him during his presidency. The good news for the current President is that history tends to view past Presidents based more on their moral character and less on the success or failure of their policies while in office.

President Bush's general image has continued to suffer as well. Forty-three percent (43%) of voters hold a favorable impression of George W. Bush, while 55% hold an unfavorable opinion. His *unfavorable* score has now been above 50% since October 2005.

The Issue Matrix

Looking back to the January survey questions of issue handling, Republicans have dropped in comparison to Democrats only on the Iraq War. On handling Iraq, 37% believe the Republican Party can do a better job and 52% believe the Democrats can do a better job. Republicans fell back an additional 7-point in comparison to the last survey.

Republicans look a little better on the health care issue, but they are still 30-points down compared to Democrats. As the chart below demonstrates, Democrats has a real advantage on health care (30 points), energy independence (25 points) and Social Security (25 points). Of these, Republicans seem likely to try and tackle the energy issue. Indeed, they may still be licking their wounds from the recent attempt to reform Social Security.

Republicans, in comparison to Democrats, only have an advantage on a few issues, including terrorism, illegal immigration, moral values and taxes. Of these, only the terrorism issue offers a significant advantage for Republicans.

In comparison, the President only has an advantage over Congressional Democrats on terrorism and moral values. Since the January survey, the President has lost ground on illegal immigration (-10 points), the economy (-10), Iraq (-7), energy independence (-6) and terrorism (-5). On Iraq, 40% have more confidence in the President to handle the issue and 54% have more confidence in the Democrats in Congress to handle it.

For Democrats in Congress, their best advantage over the President lies with energy independence (30 points), followed closely by health care (28 points). Social Security (23 points) and deficits (23 points) are also strong issues for the Democrats in Congress.

Issue Performance Comparison
Difference (Change)

	<u>GOP vs.</u> <u>Dem Parties</u> %	<u>Pres. Bush vs.</u> <u>Dems in Cong.</u> %	<u>Net</u> <u>Difference</u> %
Iraq	-15 (-7)	-14 (-7)	1
Jobs	-17 (-3)	-11 (-1)	6
Energy independence	-25 (+1)	-30 (-6)	-5
Deficits	-13	-23	-10
Taxes	2 (-1)	-2 (+4)	-4
Social Security	-23 (+1)	-23 (--)	--
Economy	-4 (-1)	-16 (-10)	-12
Terrorism	13 (-4)	10 (-5)	-3
Moral values	3 (-5)	4 (+8)	1
Illegal immigration	5 (+1)	-17 (-10)	-22
Health care	-30 (+9)	-28 (+4)	2
Corruption in DC	-16 (--)	-13 (-4)	3
Wasteful gov't spending	-9	-14	-5

It should be obvious for both the White House and the remaining Republicans in Congress, that the President is not in a position to help Congressional Republicans on specific issues.

The Congressional Picture

Before Democrats in Congress get overconfident, they need only to look at their own ratings. They have blown the opportunity they were given following the 2006 election. As Celinda Lake pointed out in her analysis of the January Battleground survey, Democrats needed to seize the opportunity “to continue to define their brand of leadership” and capture the mantel of change.

The presidential contest will soon overshadow the efforts of congressional leaders to impact public opinion and discourse on the issues of the day.

A majority of American voters (52%) disapprove of the performance of the Democrats in Congress after just their first six months in office. Thirty-seven percent (37%) of the voters approve of the performance of Congressional Democrats, but the *strong disapprove* score is actually higher at 42%. Disapproval is strongest among residents of the Mountain states, Florida and Texas, as well as among men, 35-44 year olds, Republicans, male Independents, older Independents, ticket-splitters, conservatives, moderates, married men, active Fundamentalist/Pentecostal voters and white Christian conservatives.

Among Democrats, 61% approve of the job performance of the Democrats in Congress and 30% disapprove of that performance. Among Independent voters, just 22% approve of the Democrats' performance and 56% disapprove.

Democratic leaders of the Congress, viewed neutrally in the January survey, are now viewed negatively by the voters. Both Democrat Speaker of the House Nancy Pelosi and Democrat Senate Leader Harry Reid now have more voters who are *unfavorable* toward them than are favorable.

Image Comparison of Democrat Leaders

	<u>Nancy Pelosi</u> %	<u>Harry Reid</u> %
Aware	88	55
Know/favorable	38	17
Know/unfavorable	40	23

Voters express a series of reasons why they are critical of the Democrats in Congress. Chief among these is that they gave in to President Bush on the War in Iraq. But even more important (when combined with their second choice) is the fact that the current Congress has not gotten anything done. There are other factors, but these two lead the way.

Democrats lead the charge in viewing Congressional Democrats as having given in to Bush on the War. Ticket-splitters are more likely to be focused on the fact that Democrats have not gotten anything done since taking over the Congress. Republicans have their reasons too, but they are more likely to be about their being too liberal and not having been supportive enough of the President.

Reasons Critical of Democratic Congress

	<u>First Choice</u> %	<u>Second Choice</u> %	<u>Combined</u> %
Not gotten anything done	18	20	38
Too tied to lobby/special interests	9	19	28
Too liberal	14	9	23
Gave in to Bush on Iraq War	24	11	35
Do not support Bush enough	11	14	25
Too interested raising taxes	10	12	22
Too focused on poor	4	5	9

The bad news is that Republicans in Congress enjoy an even lower rating (28% approve & 61% disapprove), but they are not in control of either chamber. There is no real consensus when it comes to criticism of the Republicans in Congress, although being “too focused on the rich” is the number one stated reason.

Still, Democrats have an 11-point advantage on the presidential generic ballot (38% Republican & 49% Democrat) and a 7-point advantage on the congressional generic ballot (40% Republican & 47% Democrat).

Generic Comparison

	<u>President</u> %	<u>Congress</u> %
Republican	38	40
Undecided	14	13
Democrat	49	47

On the presidential generic ballot, Democrats enjoy an 18-point advantage among Independent voters, but nearly a third (32%) remain undecided. On the congressional generic ballot, the Democrat lead falls to just 10-points among Independent voters and 29% remain undecided.

Generic ballots are like a rising and lowering tide in that when they rise they carry all candidates and when the fall – as they did for Republicans in the last election – the impact can be devastating. This is why generic ballots are watched so closely by both political parties. The generic advantage or disadvantage will be watched carefully as the 2008 elections draw near.

The 2008 Election

If the Democrats were hoping that their takeover of Congress would somehow give them a lift toward the 2008 presidential campaign, they must be disappointed.

Rudy Giuliani remains the most electable candidate for Republicans – even if Fred Thompson decides to get into the race. As the table below indicates, voters are still getting to know Fred Thompson and Mitt Romney. Both McCain and Giuliani have picked up some higher unfavorables in the last few months. For McCain, his unfavorables have gone up among Republicans as well.

Image Comparison of Republican Presidential Candidates
All Voters (Republicans)

	<u>Mitt Romney</u> %	<u>Rudy Giuliani</u> %	<u>John McCain</u> %	<u>Fred Thompson</u> %
Aware	77 (79)	91 (97)	96 (97)	68 (69)
Know/favorable	35 (50)	60 (76)	54 (64)	38 (52)
Know/unfavorable	25 (14)	32 (18)	33 (27)	15 (7)

On the Democrat side, Barack Obama is the more formidable in the general election. It is clear that Obama has captured the imagination of many voters – particularly among young people. Obama has surged in terms of his awareness level and remains a lot more favorably viewed than Hillary Clinton. Hillary Clinton is a polarizing figure for general election voters, but certainly not for Democrats.

African American voters have a higher opinion of Hillary Clinton than they do of Barack Obama. Among African American voters, 72% hold a favorable opinion of Obama, while 8% hold an unfavorable opinion. For Hillary Clinton, 93% of African Americans are favorable and only 7% are unfavorable.

Image Comparison of Democratic Presidential Candidates
All Voters (Democrats)

	<u>Barack Obama</u> %	<u>Hillary Clinton</u> %	<u>John Edwards</u> %
Aware	94 (91)	100(100)	95 (92)
Know/favorable	59 (73)	50 (86)	53 (73)
Know/unfavorable	28 (12)	48 (12)	34 (12)

There are still sixteen months to go before the general election of 2008. As the ballots reveal, Mayor Giuliani still beats Senator Clinton in the general election. In January, Giuliani's lead was 10-points. Today, the former Mayor leads by 5-points. But Fred Thompson does not beat Hillary Clinton or Barack Obama on the ballot.

General Election Ballots

Giuliani	49%	F. Thompson	46%
Undecided	6%	Undecided	8%
Clinton	44%	Clinton	46%
Giuliani	42%	F. Thompson	35%
Undecided	6%	Undecided	9%
Obama	52%	Obama	56%

Twenty-one percent (21%) of voters claim to be at least open to voting for a third party candidate for President. Only 8% of the total electorate reports that they are currently interested in voting for Michael Bloomberg. The fascinating thing is that of those who claim to be interested in supporting Bloomberg, they are more likely to be Independent (13%) and Democrat (9%) as compared to Republican (6%). This seems to fly in the face of current conventional wisdom. What does match conventional wisdom is that they are also more likely to be from New York.

#