

BATTLEGROUND XXXIV

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Republican Strategic Analysis

Brian C. Tringali

Partner, The Tarrance Group

Who could have guessed that in the spring of 2008 it would be the Republicans who would have selected a nominee and the Democrats would still be locked in a long and grueling fight over their nomination. The idea that the GOP has selected as its standard bearer a candidate who has the potential to appeal to the independent vote, with a history of bucking not only his party, but the status quo as well, might have appeared unlikely. It is a measure of the strength of this Republican candidate that he is in a dead heat for the highest office in the land when the brand of his party seems to have reached its lowest point.

But real life is often stranger than fiction.

In our December analysis, we pointed to a time for a change climate that Senator Clinton (and her advisors) had failed to recognize. Now, with most of the primaries behind us, the consequences of that failure seem to be about to give the nomination of the Democrat Party to relative newcomer Barack Obama.

There are consequences for Democrats as a result of this prolonged primary battle. One of these consequences is that it will be at least the summer before they are able to go after John McCain. Expect special interest coalitions to fill the void on behalf of the Democrat nominee. But that still means that as the Democrats are courting their own voters, they cannot be focused on the rest of the electorate, including the ones who shall determine the outcome in the fall. To some extent, this allows the Republican campaign to continue to gather evidence against the eventual nominee and begin to message the voters about the differences between the candidates.

Most observers agree that the Republican brand is now damaged to a degree. The President is not particularly popular – although at a personal level he is still viewed quite positively. A majority of American voters now think the War in Iraq has not been worth fighting. A majority of voters also give the national economy a “poor” rating. The net result of this is that the Democrats enjoy a strong advantage on the generic ballot at both the presidential and congressional levels.

Recently, one of the former Republican Presidential candidates was asked to offer his views on the decline of the Republican brand. Gov. Huckabee correctly pointed out that Americans do not buy Kellogg's products so much as they buy Frosted Flakes. It is an important distinction because when voters walk into the voting booth, they will be making a choice specific to the candidates themselves. And this Republican nominee is less likely to be identified with his generic brand.

John McCain has been espousing populist themes that seem perfect for the current political environment. By definition, these themes speak not only to the anti-big, anti-establishment feelings within the electorate today, but they also recognize the need to make fundamental changes. For example, McCain is talking about ways to punish corporate CEOs who take advantage of investors and consumers alike. Populist themes are something we have not heard much from the Republican Party since the days of Ronald Reagan.

So while the fight in the Democrat Party has left both Senators Clinton and Obama in the cross-hairs, it has allowed John McCain to build beyond his small cadre of workers left over from his heroic primary victory. Further, McCain has been able to begin to define a general election appeal to voters and go beyond his previous image as a "straight talker" and "maverick." Those who pay less attention to politics are getting a chance to get to know John McCain at a time that might have been filled with charges and counter-charges if there had been a Democrat nominee by now.

Particularly for the presidency, voters are always looking for a candidate they can "trust" to make their lives better. As this survey reveals, voters are already more inclined to think that McCain would do a better job of handling the security issues -- including the War, terrorism and immigration. Similarly, McCain is seen as a stronger leader than Obama. But the jury is still out on which candidate the voters will trust the most on the economy and on sharing their values, which are the dimensions more likely to be central to the vote decision in the fall.

Historically, the leading question to the ballot decision has been which of the candidates is more likely to keep America prosperous. Right now, neither candidate has an advantage on this measure.

In the end, this election will be about making real change, not merely providing hope for change. The question that will have to be answered is no longer which of the candidates will give us change, for each can argue that they will be a change from our current course. Come the fall, the more central question will be what kind of a change each of the candidates will bring and how they will achieve it. John McCain has been given a head start in answering that central question.

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The Demand for Change

The feeling among American voters that the nation is headed off on the wrong track has continued to grow. Seventy-seven percent (77%) of the electorate now believes that the nation is off on the wrong track – up an additional six points since last December. More importantly, 64% of the voters feel strongly that we are off on the wrong track.

This negative feeling about our nation's direction is strongest among minority women, young people, those who are not married, those who do not go to church, and those who are not Republicans. But even a majority of Republicans (55%) think the nation is off on the wrong track.

This may be the highest level of concern about our nation's course ever expressed by the voters. The national feeling is somewhat comparable to the end of the Carter Administration when we had long lines for gas and a failed rescue attempt of the hostages in Iran.

Direction of the Country

	Jan. '07 %	July '07 %	Dec. '07 %	May '08 %
Right Direction	25	21	21	17
Unsure	11	9	8	6
Wrong Track	64	70	71	77

The driving force behind this latest surge in negative feeling is clearly the economy. With the front pages of American newspapers now focused on the economy and the Democrat primary election, the War in Iraq and other security issues are no longer at the forefront of voter concerns. This is likely to continue to be the case as long as the War in Iraq continues to go well and the threat of terror is not raised within our borders.

Forty-six percent (46%) of voters think the biggest issue for Congress to get to work on involves something to do with pocketbook concerns. These concerns are dominated by a focus on the economy and jobs (23%), as well as gas and energy prices (15%). Concerns about the economy and jobs are driven largely by Midwesterners, those who live in battleground congressional districts, 35-44 year olds, Hispanics, younger Democrats, male Democrats, conservative Democrats, Wal-mart women, and non-senior white women at home. Concern about gas and energy prices is driven by Central Plains residents, Mountain States residents, African American men, male Independents, younger Independents, conservative Democrats, non-college men, active Baptists, Wal-mart men and non-white conservative Christians.

Security issues are taking a back seat to pocketbook concerns for the moment. But as the table below demonstrates, voters are more likely to switch to security worries after expressing concern about pocketbook matters. Chief among the security concerns remains the War in Iraq (15%). This is particularly true among African American men, white male seniors, male Democrats, 45+ Democrats, younger Independents, moderate-to-liberal Democrats and active Catholics.

It is important to note too that health care concerns have not been completely displaced. It remains an important issue to much of the electorate, not just seniors.

Most Important Issue for Congress

	<u>First Choice</u>	<u>Second Choice</u>	<u>Third Choice</u>
	%	%	%
Pocketbook concerns	46	32	29
Security concerns	28	41	39
Health/SS/Education	18	25	29
Combination/other/unsure	8	2	2

Certainly the American electorate believes that the economy is in dire straits. Fifty-six percent (56%) of the voters give the economy a poor rating, but nearly half (48%) give their own personal economic situation an excellent or good rating. So voters are split in their view of their personal situation. This suggests that concerns about the economy are based more in fear than in current personal impact. There is considerable evidence to suggest that this level of concern is based largely in fears about the future rather than specific events that have already taken place.

Those who give the American economy its lowest ratings include Midwesterners, Californians, young people, younger women, minorities, Democrats, Independent women, non-college men, unmarried women and those who do not attend church. Those who feel most positively about their own personal economic situation include Californians, Texans, those who live out West, employed men, older men, white seniors, white men, Republicans, college graduates, college men, married men and those who never shop at Wal-mart.

Economic Rating Comparison

	<u>Overall Economy</u> %	<u>Personal Situation</u> %
Excellent	1	8
Good	13	40
Fair	30	38
Poor	56	14

The economic issue that voters claim is most important in determining their vote is gas and energy prices (22%). Out of the long list of issues, this is the one that most concerns the electorate – but it may end up being just the hot topic of the moment. Central Plains residents, rural residents, unemployed men, 18-29 year olds, senior white men, Republican men, non-college men, unmarried men, male born-again Evangelicals, white Evangelicals and Wal-mart men are among the more likely to be fixated on this issue.

As mentioned earlier, health care costs are also a big concern. Fourteen percent (14%) of respondents mentioned health care costs as being the largest economic issue likely to impact their vote for President. Not surprisingly, these voters tended to be seniors but also were likely to include ticket-splitters.

But the results are mixed about whether American voters have a positive or negative view of the future overall and the American dream.

Thirty-six percent (36%) of voters feel that their children will be better off than they are right now – a three-point drop since the previous year. A third (33%) of voters say their children will be worse off than they themselves and another 28% think they will be about the same. Seniors, conservative Democrats, union households and male Independents are more likely to believe that their children will be worse off.

Future Of Your Children

	<u>Jan. '07</u> %	<u>Dec. '07</u> %	<u>May '08</u> %
Better off	39	39	36
About the same	19	26	28
Worse off	37	30	33

Only 30% of voters feel that the next generation will be better off economically than they are now. Further, 65% disagree with the statement. Disagreement is strongest among those 60-65 years of age who are either just about to or just entering retirement.

But most Americans do agree that anyone can get ahead if they work hard enough. On this measure, 65% agree and 33% disagree. But there is a big difference between men and women here, as 74% of men agree but only 58% of women feel the same way. Republicans and those with a higher education level are overwhelmingly supportive of this view.

The one thing most agreed to in this series is the statement that the current economy makes it too tough on the middle class to make ends meet. Seventy-two percent (72%) of the electorate agrees with this statement. Those driving this view tend to be women (especially working women), young people, minorities and Democrats.

Despite all of these pent up frustrations, the final question in the battery shows that two-thirds (67%) of the electorate is optimistic about where they will be financially in five years. So despite all of their concerns, and there are many, the voters think that they personally are likely to be better off financially in the short-term. That kind of undying optimism remains at the center of the American spirit and defines Americans in a unique way from all others. This viewpoint is part of what makes others interested in coming to this country.

Voters may have their concerns, but the American dream is far from dead.

The President And The War

George W. Bush is a President almost completely defined by the War being waged during his final year in office. Sure the Administration is doing lots of things, but it is hard for the voters to look beyond the War in Iraq when thinking about this President.

The President's image has certainly been impacted. At present, 41% of the voters hold a favorable view of the President, while 58% hold an unfavorable view. This upside down view of him has existed since at least October 2005. George W. Bush's image has actually dropped in this latest survey. His unfavorable scores are strongest among young people and minorities.

But Republicans continue to hold a favorable view of the President, as 79% are favorable and only 19% are unfavorable.

The President's job approval has reached an all time low. Just 32% of voters approve of his performance in office and 63% disapprove. It is not that the voters are unable to make up their minds about his performance. Again, minorities and young people are the toughest on the President. Among Independent voters, 17% approve of the President's performance and 76% disapprove. Even a quarter (26%) of Republicans disapprove of his performance.

Presidential Job Approval

	Jan. <u>'07</u> %	July <u>'07</u> %	Dec. <u>'07</u> %	May <u>'08</u> %
Approve	42	36	38	32
Unsure	3	4	4	5
Disapprove	54	61	59	63

But like Ronald Reagan before him, voters seem able to disapprove of the President's performance and still approve of him as a person. When respondents are asked for their impression of George W. Bush as a person, 56% approve and just 36% disapprove. This feeling about the President personally is so pervasive that even 25% of Democrats approve of him personally.

Hispanic voters follow this same trend, while African Americans and young people do not.

This is an important distinction for Democrat candidates to the degree they plan to run against Bush this cycle. Not only is Bush not on the ballot, but the voters make a clear distinction between the man and his policies.

It is important to note that history tends to judge past President's not so much on their success or failure in policy areas, but on the moral character of the individual. Former President Carter is perhaps our best living example. History will probably be kinder to President Bush. In focus groups throughout the country, voters continue to tell us that they view the President as a principled, honest and determined leader.

But Presidents are in-part chosen in direct response to their predecessors. Just as George W. Bush was chosen by an electorate weary of a President seen as too slick and with weak moral values, our next President is likely to be chosen in part as a reaction to the perceived weaknesses of our current President. Voters today are looking for a President that can sell his own policies and articulate his plans of action.

Presidential Personal Approval

	Dec. <u>'07</u> %	May <u>'08</u> %
Approve	55	56
Unsure	9	7
Disapprove	36	36

Over time, we have seen a growing view that the War in Iraq has not been worth fighting. This view has now reached the 56% level. Those most likely to hold this view include young people, minorities, urban residents, Independents and Democrats. This view is held by 91% of African Americans.

But 75% of Republicans think the War has been worth fighting. With Republican men, the figure rises to 83% who think the War has been worth it. The key group is Independent voters, who break two-to-one against the War being worth it.

This is a trend not likely to shift. We have to keep in mind that although the press has been unable to write much to the negative about the War of late, this has not resulted in positive press. The result has been a lowered focus on the War, which has not left a vacuum. On the contrary, it has allowed the Democrat Party to portray the War negatively despite the lack of headlines to back up their claims. As a result, we can expect to see a continuing lowering of support for the War – even in an atmosphere of positive outcomes in Iraq.

View of Iraq War

	Jan. <u>'07</u> %	July <u>'07</u> %	Dec. <u>'07</u> %	May <u>'08</u> %
Worth Fighting	46	43	43	40
Unsure	6	5	5	4
Not Worth	48	53	52	56

The electorate does not recognize that the situation in Iraq has gotten better over the last six months. Indeed, a time series of this question reveals that voters are more likely to think that things are moving in the wrong direction. Today, 65% of the voters think that the situation in Iraq has gotten worse or remained the same – a 12 point increase since the last six months. This has to be incredibly frustrating for the Administration and our military.

Republicans are again holding out on this issue. Among Republicans, 58% think that things in Iraq have gotten better over the last six months. The figure rises to 70% among Republican men.

Situation In Iraq (Over Last 6 Months)

	Dec. '07 %	May '08 %
Gotten Better	43	32
Stayed Same	30	35
Gotten Worse	23	30

When it comes to a plan for Iraq, a plurality of voters actually support the idea that the U.S. should keep its forces in Iraq until military leaders there confirm that the situation in Iraq is stable enough that extremist forces will not be able to seize control once U.S. troops leave. A majority (57%) of voters are looking for withdrawal of the troops. But this position is divided into two camps, those who would like to see an immediate withdrawal (25%) and those who would like to see a date set for withdrawal within the next two years but to begin the withdrawal immediately (32%).

Sixty-nine percent (69%) of Republican voters would support the view that we should stay in Iraq until it becomes stable. Among Democrats, the percentage of those who want to stay in Iraq drops to just 14%. But Independent voters are evenly divided among the three options – suggesting that as a group, they have not formed an opinion. Overall, 40% of the voters would like to keep U.S. forces in Iraq until military leaders there confirm that the situation is stable enough that extremist forces will not be able to seize control once our troops leave.

Public opinion surrounding the potential for future conflicts has clearly been influenced by the War in Iraq. If it is discovered that Iran has nuclear weapons, a plurality of voters (38%) are unsure about the whether the U.S. should take military action. A third of voters (33%) would support military action and 29% would be opposed. Democrats and Independent voters are more likely to be divided between opposition and remaining unsure. A majority of Republicans would support action.

A Damaged Brand

The Republican brand is not in good condition, but the Democrats are not in much better shape. The trends, however, are clearly with the Democrats. As the GOP image in Congress has gotten worse, the Democrat image has actually improved slightly.

Republicans in Congress have a 31% favorable rating and 56% are unfavorable. That unfavorable score has been growing over the last year, but in the last six months, the favorable dropped 5 points and the unfavorable score increased by 5 points as well.

What is concerning is that among Republican voters, the image rating for Republicans in Congress is 58% favorable and 28% unfavorable – just a two-to-one ratio. Among Independents, 20% are favorable and 63% are unfavorable.

A year ago, the Democrats in Congress enjoyed a positive image, but they have squandered that. Today, 42% have a favorable view of the Democrats in Congress and 46% have an unfavorable view. Among Democrats, 69% are favorable and 19% are unfavorable toward their own party. But among Independents, 33% are favorable and 51% are unfavorable.

Party Image Comparison

	GOP <u>Cong.</u> %	Dem <u>Cong.</u> %
Favorable	31	42
Unfavorable	56	46
No Opinion	12	11

In rating the job performance of both parties in Congress, again the Republicans have seen a real drop in their ratings, but Democrats are not viewed much better by the voters. But the big change over the last six months has been a seven point increase in the disapprove rating for Congressional Republicans, while the disapprove score for Democrats only went up three points.

Again, the key on the score for Republicans in Congress are the Republican voters themselves. Among Republicans, 41% approve of the efforts of the GOP in Congress and 47% disapprove. This level of disapproval within their own party has to be a concern for GOP leaders in Congress. But it is important to remember that John McCain is the *de facto* leader of the Republican Party now that he has achieved the nomination.

Among Independent voters, 12% approve of the performance of Republicans in Congress and 76% disapprove.

None of this should suggest that the Democrats in Congress are seen as doing a good job. Only 31% of the voters approve of the job that the Democrats in Congress are doing in office – down four points over the last six months. Fifty-seven percent (57%) of the voters disapprove of their performance – up three points over the last six months. Among Independents, 25% approve of the performance of the Democrats in Congress and 62% disapprove.

Party Approval Comparison

	GOP <u>Cong.</u> %	Dem <u>Cong.</u> %
Approve	21	31
Unsure	11	11
Disapprove	68	57

An improvement in the generic ballot – whether respondents would prefer to see a Republican or Democrat in the office – has not materialized for Republicans. That has to be of some concern, although not so much for the candidate at the top-of-the-ticket as much as for those farther down the ballot.

At the presidential level, the Democrat candidate enjoys an eight point advantage. This generic advantage remains strongest among young people and minorities. Among Independents, 28% support the Republican and 46% support the Democrat. The key here is that Democrats are more energized than Republicans, as 85% of Republicans support their nominee and 91% of Democrats support their nominee – but at least things are close in terms of partisan intensity at the presidential level.

When it comes to Congress, there is a slightly wider spread on the generic ballot. Forty percent (40%) of the voters would prefer to see a Republican candidate in office and 49% would prefer to see a Democrat. Particularly at the congressional level, the generic ballot can have a big impact on elections as it acts as a tide against which the prospects of each of the party's rise and fall.

Democrats have a 10 point advantage on intensity within their own party compared to Republicans. Just 82% of Republicans would like to see a Republican in Congress, while 92% of Democrats would like to see a Democrat in office. But among Independents, Democrats enjoy a 20 point advantage, as 27% would prefer a Republican in office and 47% would prefer a Democrat. In a presidential year (especially one with Barack Obama on the ticket) these Independent voters are going to make it to their respective polling places.

Generic Support Comparison

	<u>Congress</u>	<u>President</u>
	%	%
Republican	40	41
Undecided	11	10
Democrat	49	49
Net	-9	-8

So why has not the generic ballot changed since the Democrats took over the U.S. Congress? Part of the reason is that, as focus groups have revealed, the voters themselves are largely unaware of the change. In addition, as we have seen in the past, voters are likely to view the party that controls the White House as the political party in power.

This remains the case today, although many Republicans in Congress might find this surprising. Forty-eight percent (48%) of voters think the Republican Party is in control of the federal government, while only 30% think that the Democrat Party is in control. Young people and minorities are among the most likely to view the Republicans as being in control.

A majority of Republicans (53%) think that the Democrats are in control of the federal government. Seventy-four percent (74%) of Democrats think that Republicans are in control of the federal government. But Independents are twice as likely to view Republicans as in control than Democrats. This is a very big problem for the Republican Party as it enters the election season, particularly for those concerned with congressional races.

Presidential candidates may be able to transcend the party brand, but this may be more difficult for those who are down the ballot. John McCain, as a candidate, already has elements within his image that transcend his party. Republican candidates for Congress may want to keep in mind McCain's transcendent nature before they are too quick to separate themselves from his candidacy.

So, in many respects, John McCain may be just what the doctor ordered for a Republican Party suffering from a wounded brand.

So You Want To Be President

Based upon desire alone, most voters probably expected Senator Clinton to be our next President, but that looks unlikely at this stage of the game. One of the reasons is the fact that she is such a polarizing figure. But it is also in part because she ran as an incumbent

in an atmosphere of change. It is simply not believable that anyone could “have 35 years of experience fighting for change.”

Americans also have a difficult time turning back the clock. This is particularly true among members of the Democrat Party. Many Democrats seem to be anxious to put the Clinton years behind them. Many Republicans and Independents voted in the Democrat primaries not so much to support Barack Obama as much as vote against Senator Clinton. Should she have become the nominee, she would have done a lot to turn out voters from across the country come the fall as well.

Democratic officials and super-delegates are probably anxious to get beyond Senator Clinton as well. At this stage of the game, if she were to get the nomination, the Democrat Party would have a serious turnout problem of its own. Young people and African American voters are particularly supportive of Barack Obama and if he were to lose the nomination at this stage – particularly at the hands of those super-delegates – Democrats would have a problem with young voters and African Americans well after this year’s election were concluded.

Senator Clinton remains polarizing today, as 46% are favorable toward her and 51% are unfavorable. The Senator’s unfavorable rating is climbing, but slowly. For most voters, Senator Clinton has long been a known entity and they are simply not very malleable when it comes to the way they think about her.

Senator Clinton’s Image

	Jan. <u>'07</u> %	July <u>'07</u> %	Dec. <u>'07</u> %	May <u>'08</u> %
Favorable	51	50	48	46
Unfavorable	46	48	50	51
No Opinion	3	1	2	3

But over this same time period of a little over a year, Barack Obama has also seen his unfavorable score increase. In early January, 21% of the electorate had still never heard of Obama. The ratio of favorable to unfavorable voters has dropped each time as well. Today, 54% of the voters are favorable toward Obama and 40% are unfavorable.

The fight within the Democrat Party means that not all Democrats are favorable towards Barack Obama. Among Democrats, 75% are favorable toward him, but 21% are unfavorable. Among conservative Democrats (a key component of success in the fall), Obama has a 29% unfavorable. Among Independents, 58% are favorable and 35% are unfavorable.

With Republicans, Barack Obama has an unfavorable that is twice as large as his favorable rating. But his ratings get worse among White voters, among whom he has a one-to-one favorable to unfavorable ratio. Florida residents, rural voters, white men, conservatives, those with a lower education level, Fundamentalist/Pentecostal voters and Wal-mart shoppers are all more likely to have an unfavorable view of the likely Democrat nominee.

Barack Obama's image is almost all favorable among African American voters. But this is not the case among Hispanic voters, among whom 61% are favorable and 32% are unfavorable. Given John McCain's experience with the Hispanic community and his position on immigration, this may represent an opportunity.

Barack Obama's Image

	Jan. '07 %	July '07 %	Dec. '07 %	May '08 %
Favorable	46	59	57	54
Unfavorable	21	28	33	40
No Opinion	12	8	7	6
Ratio	2.2:1	2.1:1	1.7:1	1.4:1

A slim majority of voters (53%) think that the race discussion within the Democrat primary has been a benefit for the country because it provided a thoughtful way to have a conversation about race relations. But 35% think that it was bad for the country because it worsened race relations. The numbers are not too different among Democrats themselves -- among whom it is 61% to 30%.

John McCain's image is only a little better than Barack Obama's. Fifty-four percent (54%) of the voters hold a favorable impression of the Republican nominee while 39% are unfavorable. McCain's unfavorable ratings climb among minorities, urban residents and Democrats -- but little beyond those groups.

Among Republicans, 81% are favorable and 15% are unfavorable toward McCain. Among Democrats, 28% are favorable and 63% are unfavorable toward the Republican. Among Independents, 54% are favorable and 39% are unfavorable -- a perfect reflection of the overall electorate.

John McCain's Image

	Jan. '07 %	July '07 %	Dec. '07 %	May '08 %
Favorable	62	54	58	54
Unfavorable	25	33	29	39
No Opinion	8	9	8	6
Ratio	2.5:1	1.6:1	2:1	1.4:1

The Lines Are Drawn

The race is about to come down to Barack Obama and John McCain. As such, the central question of the survey is the ballot between the two. At the moment, that ballot is tied, or at least within the margin of error. Forty-seven percent (47%) of the voters are supportive of John McCain, while 49% are supportive of Barack Obama.

McCain is doing well among men, seniors, whites, conservatives, those who are married with children, and those who go to church regularly. Even those who are most likely to shop at Wal-mart are supporting McCain's candidacy. McCain is capturing 90% of the vote among Republicans, which makes it hard to argue that base Republicans are not going to be there for John McCain in the fall.

Barack Obama captures just 85% of the Democrat vote, revealing that his base is actually less intense than McCain's. For his part Obama certainly does well among young people, minorities, urban residents, working women, liberals, union households and Baptists. Among Independents, 37% are supporting McCain and 51% are supporting Obama – which is where his slight edge comes from on the overall ballot.

At present the ballot is too close between these two candidates to call. This is a surprising place to be for John McCain with six months to go in this election. The political environment as described would seem to be conspiring against McCain's candidacy, and yet, despite all of this, John McCain is in a dead heat for the White House.

All of this suggests that it is going to be a very, very close election in the fall.

Turnout modeling actually gives John McCain the edge over Barack Obama. McCain gets to a majority in the model by virtue of his support among seniors as much as anything else. It is interesting to note that among those who have a favorable image of both candidates (24% of the electorate), the ballot between McCain and Obama is within the margin of error. Among those who have an unfavorable image of both (11% of the electorate), McCain captures 52% of the vote compared to Obama's 35%.

Presidential Ballot Comparison

McCain	47%	McCain	51%
Undecided	5%	Undecided	6%
Obama	49%	Clinton	43%

Only 73% of those who plan to support Barack Obama say that they would support Hillary Clinton if she were the nominee. That would drop her support level to merely 36% of the vote.

The real shame here is that John McCain is not going to have the opportunity to run against Senator Clinton. Against Senator Clinton, John McCain is showing 51% of the vote. Senator Clinton’s support is 6 points lower than Barack Obama at 43%.

It is interesting that only 72% of the voters report that they would support Barack Obama if their choice of Senator Clinton were not available to them. That calculation would drop Barack Obama’s level of support 32%. When faced with Senator Clinton, McCain does significantly better than against Barack Obama among 35-44 year olds (+10), Independents (+10), 18-34 year olds (+12) and conservative Democrats (+14).

Forty-two percent (42%) of the electorate is at least “somewhat” dissatisfied with their choice of candidates for President this year. But only 18% are “very” dissatisfied with their choice and that is probably the more significant figure. In the McCain vs. Obama contest, 27% of McCain voters are very dissatisfied and only 6% of Obama voters feel the same. In the McCain vs. Clinton contest, 25% of McCain voters are very dissatisfied and 9% of Clinton voters feel the same.

Information Impact Comparison

	<u>Barack Obama</u> %	<u>Hillary Clinton</u> %	<u>John McCain</u> %
More likely	37	32	37
Unsure	4	4	6
No difference	12	11	13
Less likely	47	54	44

The impact of the primary season is revealed by the table above. John McCain has been the beneficiary of the lack of negative attacks that these several weeks have afforded him. For McCain, 37% have been more likely to support him based upon what they have seen and only 44% have been less likely to do so. Among Republicans, 66% report that they would be more likely to support their candidate and only 17% would be less likely.

Most interesting is to look at the difference between Barack Obama and Senator Clinton on this measure. Among Democrats, a 57% majority would be more likely to support Obama based upon what they have seen, read or heard lately. For Senator Clinton, just 48% of Democrats would be so influenced. Among Independents, the question splits evenly for Obama, but for Senator Clinton more than 60% would be less likely to support her as a result of what they have seen lately.

A Difference Of Issues

John McCain was compared to both Barack Obama and Senator Clinton on 14 separate issues and characteristics. In these comparisons, John McCain has an advantage on security and leadership issues. The jury is largely out in terms of the economic issues, as no candidate has a significant advantage.

It is clear, however, that John McCain is aware that the issues likely to determine the outcome of this election are economic. McCain has also been using populist rhetoric to describe the need for reform in our economy, including the need to go after corporate CEO's who abuse the public trust. He recently shocked some observers by endorsing the idea of a gas tax moratorium – at least in the short-term.

McCain goes beyond the normal anti-tax Republican message and talks directly about jobs. At a recent speech in Pennsylvania he stated;

"The great goal is to get the American economy running at full strength again, creating the opportunities Americans' expect, and the jobs Americans need."- John McCain (4/15/08, speaking at Carnegie Mellon University)

McCain's greatest advantage against Obama comes on "safeguarding America from a terrorist threat." On this issue, 60% think McCain would do the best job and just 31% think Barack Obama would do the better job (+29). Fundamentalists/Pentecostal voters are among the most likely to support McCain on this question, as 67% are supportive of him.

McCain has a strong advantage on dealing with Iraq. Fifty-five percent (55%) of voters give McCain the edge on dealing with Iraq while only 38% have confidence that Barack Obama would do a better job (+17). It is interesting that even a majority of Hispanics give the edge to McCain on the matter.

McCain also enjoys a double digit (+12) advantage for dealing with illegal immigration. On the question of illegal immigration, 48% think that John McCain would do a better job and 36% think that Barack Obama would do a better job. Even 24% of Democrats give the advantage on this issue to McCain.

John McCain does have an advantage against Barack Obama on being a strong leader but it drops to single digits (+5). Given the experience differences between the two candidates, it is hard to believe the margin is not wider. Independent voters seem to be split on the question and it is likely that they do not have the information to make up their minds.

McCain loses a number of issues by single digits against Obama. These are issues that are likely to be in contention between the two candidates for some time. The most important among these are “shares your values” and “keeping America prosperous.” This latter issue is likely to be the key determinant of how and why late decision makers move in the final few weeks of a presidential election. On this issue, John McCain loses the Independent voters 29% to 47%.

On six issues, Barack Obama enjoys a double digit lead over John McCain for doing a better job. These include “reducing gas and energy prices” (-19), “unite the country” (-20), “cares about people like me” (-20), “creating jobs” (-21), “represents middle class values” (-24), and “making health care affordable” (-36). Of these “creating jobs” is probably the one for the McCain campaign to focus upon.

Further, if John McCain is substantially behind on a matter of an issue, then it is likely that the other Republican candidates on the ballot will face a generic deficit on this issue as well – unless they have staked out a claim to the issue on their own. New candidates, by definition, have staked out no claims on issues on their own – at least not yet.

Issue/Characteristic Comparison Table

<u>Issue/Characteristic</u>	<u>McCain</u>	<u>Obama</u>	<u>Net</u>	<u>McCain</u>	<u>Clinton</u>	<u>Net</u>
	%	%	%	%	%	%
Safeguarding America from a terrorist threat	60	31	29	62	29	33
Dealing with Iraq	55	38	17	57	37	20
Dealing with illegal immigration	48	36	12	49	34	15
Strong leader	48	43	5	50	42	8
Shares your values	43	46	-3	49	41	8
Better understands the economy	41	46	-5	38	49	-11
Keeping America prosperous	41	47	-6	42	47	-5
Will get things done	40	48	-8	42	46	-4
Reducing gas and energy prices	31	50	-19	33	44	-11
Unite the country	33	53	-20	43	38	5
Cares about people like me	33	53	-20	40	44	-4
Creating jobs	33	54	-21	38	52	-14
Represents the middle class	34	58	-24	40	49	-9
Making health care affordable	24	61	-37	30	60	-30

So Republicans might enjoy a generic advantage on security issues, and maybe leadership too, when it comes to the 2008 election cycle. While the last several elections have focused on security issues, this election cycle is likely to be focused on the waning economy. But a lot of the economic issues are evenly divided between the candidates, having not been decisively claimed by either of them yet. Indeed, despite the fact that this election has been going strong for more than a year, many of the voters have not really begun to pay much attention yet.

A Real Change

When it comes to these issues and the course our nation will take in the years after this election, John McCain is offering the electorate a real change, rather than merely hope for change. The good news for Republicans is that they have a standard bearer that goes outside of the normal mold of a GOP candidate and issues. The populist themes currently being developed by the McCain campaign recognize the anti-big, anti-establishment sentiment of the electorate and the need for change that the voters of today demand.

However, there is no mistaking John McCain's Conservative Populism with Clintonian Third Way Centrism. Upon hearing portions of Senator McCain's April economic speech, focus groups consistently remark how he sounds like a different kind of Republican, not that he sounds like a Democrat.

Furthermore, there is a reason McCain over-performs the generic Presidential ballot, and it is not because he is any better known or even liked than the presumptive Democrat nominee. McCain's and Obama's images are almost exactly the same, with equal favorables and unfavorables. McCain has an opportunity to redefine his party in an historic way, and in doing so could draw a sharp contrast with his opponent.

Senator McCain advocates lower taxes, while clearly laying out their purpose: to create jobs and help workers compete, and to encourage businesses to stay and grow in America. Tax cuts with a purpose – not just tax cuts for the sake of tax cuts.

McCain also extends *a carrot* with one hand to American business, while (to borrow from Teddy Roosevelt) he also carries *a big stick*. In his speeches, the Senator reserves some of his harshest criticism for big business, including: "reckless corporate conduct" for which regular Americans have had to foot the bill and the "extravagant" salaries and severance packages for CEOs. McCain rails against corporate welfare at a time when people are struggling.

The third leg of the populist stool is eliminating pork barrel spending. Last weekend, on *Saturday Night Live*, McCain used his time to rail against wasteful spending, albeit in a farcical way. There is no mistaking John McCain for anything but a Republican, but there is no denying he represents real change.