

The Battleground 2008

August 2008

Democratic Strategic Analysis:

by Celinda Lake, Daniel Gotoff, and Mark Keida

With fewer than 11 weeks to go, Americans remain deeply dissatisfied with the direction of the country and President Bush's leadership. Four dollar a gallon gas, a war that has dragged our country into recession and made us less safe, a health care system in crisis – and a President and Party seemingly oblivious to the nation's pain. Voters' appetite for change remains intense and palpable.

For most of the summer, these dynamics combined to afford Obama a narrow, though consistent lead. At this point in the contest, however, after a continued and largely unanswered negative campaign on the part of McCain, the race is a statistical dead heat (47% for McCain to 46% for Obama). Underneath the more modest movement in the overall vote from our last poll, however, is a larger shift among independents that is of particular concern for Obama. In May, Obama led among independents by 14 points; today, McCain is winning these voters by 10 points. At the same time, voters are solidly negative in their assessment of the country (75% say we are on the wrong track), their assessment of the economy (67% say it is "just fair" or "poor"), and their disapproval of Bush's job (63% disapprove), which bodes well for Obama.

Obama still has voters to gain. Voters view him as the candidate who better embodies middle class values, is more apt to fight for "people like me" and get things done, can more capably handle the pressing issues of the economy and health care; he is also perceived as the more independent of the two candidates. Yet these advantages are not translating into a ballot advantage for Obama. Obama has effectively claimed both the dimensions of leadership and the key issues that are central to this election. In order to start converting these advantages into real ballot support, he needs to play commandingly not just on his own turf, but on McCain's too, competing with the Republican nominee on the qualities that are central to his image: strong leadership, and advantages on Iraq and other matters of national security and foreign policy. Part of this task involves Obama continuing to establish his own bona fides on these fronts. Equally important, and heretofore missing, is exposing McCain's substantial weakness when it comes to these issues and dimensions of leadership, which remain so essential in a post-9/11 world.

The race to control the U.S. Congress is decidedly less eventful – and more assured. The Democrats continue to lead by a solid 6-point margin, very close to the advantage they had at this point in the 2006 cycle. The component pieces are there for the Democrats to engineer a sweep at virtually every level of federal office.

This poll represents a traditional turnout pattern. Obama's ace in the hole, however, is his ability to change the electorate. Modeling even a modest increase in youth turnout generates a 3-point lead for Obama (48% to 45%).

CHANGE? VOTERS WANT A FULL REFUND ON THE BUSH YEARS.

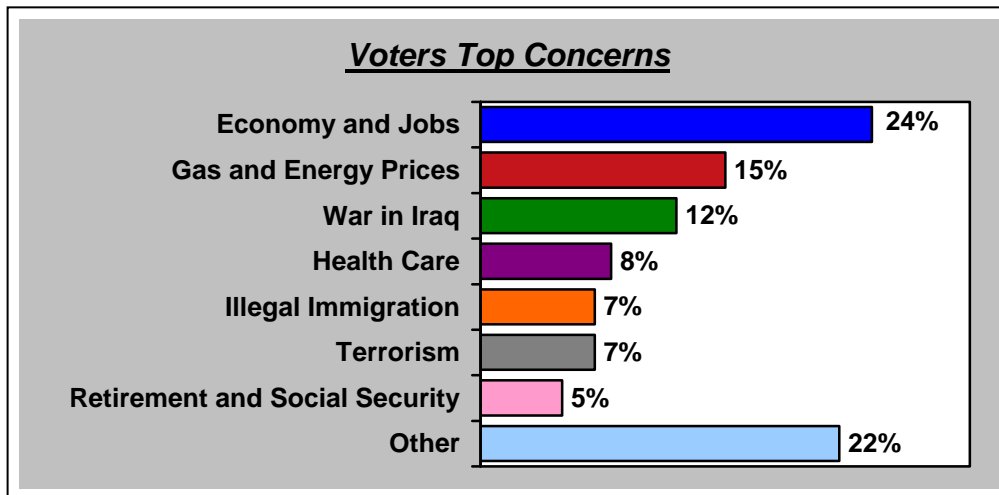
Voters want change and both candidates are trying to attach that mantle to themselves. Democrats are served well whenever they are able to successfully tie McCain to Bush's policies, as voters have thoroughly rejected Bush's 8-year track record. In the first Battleground survey following Bush's takeover in 2001, voters were effectively split on the direction of the country (40% right direction / 45% wrong track). It did not take long for those assessments to grow increasingly farther apart under Republican stewardship. Today, three-quarters of voters (75%) say things in the country are pretty seriously off on the wrong track, including over six-in-ten (63%) who feel this way strongly. Only 18% think the country is headed in the right direction (7% strongly) – essentially unchanged from May, but far lower than when Bush took office. Welcome to the “change” election.

And it is not just “frustrated” Democrats who feel this way – even if they were the first to identify the downward trajectory into which the country has been pulled. **Majorities of every demographic and partisan subgroup say the country is headed off on the wrong track**, including 94 percent of Democrats, 78 percent of independents, and even a 55 percent majority of Republicans. Fully 86% of undecided voters on the Presidential ballot want change as well.

The question, of course, is whether – and to what extent – this dynamic will accrue to Obama's benefit, as the standard bearer of the Party out of power and as the chief politician associated with the change message. It is not surprising that among the few Americans who look positively on the direction of the country McCain is doing quite well, besting Obama, 88% to 7%. Yet among change-oriented voters, Obama is beating McCain by a wide margin, 58% to 34%, which also bodes well for future gains among undecided voters. Moreover, voters solidly believe Bush is doing a bad job – 35% approve and 63% disapprove. Among undecided voters, only 22% approve and a whopping 72% disapprove. Surely, the man who has voted to ratify Bush's agenda at increasingly higher rates over the years (culminating with him voting with Bush 100% of the time this year) is the less likely of the two candidates to put the country on a new course. Of course, that critical piece of information has eluded many Americans so far, as the McCain campaign assiduously works to maintain the “maverick” label.

Voters' assessment of the nation's course might be more positive had Bush's so-called economic “recovery” actually trickled down to the 95% of the country that needs it. Fully HALF of voters cite pocketbook economic issues as the top concerns facing the country – the economy and jobs (24%), gas prices (15%), and health care costs (8%) top the panoply of economic anxieties. This is essentially unchanged from May. In fact, pluralities of Democrats (32%) and independents (17%) cite the economy and jobs, while Republicans say gas and energy prices are their chief concerns (21%, compared to 18% economy and jobs). The war in Iraq continues to drop off of voters' radar (12%, down from 15% in May). Noticeably, concerns over “moral values” are nowhere to be found this cycle. With the economy dominating, traditional wedge issues are much less likely to work.

Obama is handily winning voters who are most concerned with the war in Iraq (+42), health care costs (+38), and the economy and jobs (+18). McCain is posting even more impressive margins, however, among those voters most concerned with terrorism (-86), illegal immigration (-59), and, most troubling, gas prices (-37).



THE BELTWAY WALTZ: DANCING AROUND THE “R” WORD

It seems these days the only people who think the U.S. economy is *not* in a recession are working for the Bush administration or the McCain campaign. Americans do not see themselves as a “Nation of Whiners,” as McCain’s economic advisor put it. They are feeling a real squeeze: gas prices hovering around \$4 dollars a gallon, skyrocketing education and health care costs, record personal debt, soaring prices for staple commodities like milk, sugar, and rice.

To “Main Street” Americans, the economy is certainly experiencing more than just a little hiccup and the economic pinch they’re feeling is not all in their minds, to paraphrase McCain’s economic advisor. **Forty-four percent of voters have been touched by joblessness over the past year;** even if they have not been laid off themselves, the specter of losing one’s ability to support his/ her family looms large. **Nearly six-in-ten (59%) say the economy in their area is in recession, and another quarter say the economy is looking down, not up.** Only 15% say the economy in their area is in on the rebound, 10% of whom say it is growing but not as quickly as they would like (the other 4% say the economy is in a recovery and a scant 1% of voters say it is strong and growing).

Asked another way, fully half of voters rate the economy in the worst terms permitted in our survey (50% “poor”), followed by another 37% who give the economy a middling rating of “fair.” Compare this to the 14% who give the economy a rating of either “excellent” (1%) or “good” (13%) – a figure which would presumably include McCain. This is a stark contrast for Obama to underscore.

Swing undecided voters have much more in common with Obama voters than McCain voters when it comes to their views on the economy. For example, 63% of McCain voters say they are positive about their own economic situation but only 39% of Obama and undecided voters agree with that. Similarly, only 27% of McCain voters believe the national economy is poor, but 63% of undecided voters and 71% of Obama voters say the economy is poor. Drawing a starker contrast on the economy is key to winning undecided voters.

As we found in previous Battleground surveys, the so-called “Nation of Whiners” is comprised of people from across the political spectrum, including many in McCain’s own Party. **Democrats (94% “recession/downturn” / 96% “fair/poor economy”) and independents (83% / 91%) rate the economy in decidedly negative terms, as do solid majorities of Republicans (74% / 74%).** Some “straight talk” is probably best kept among very close company, since those who cite “jobs and the economy” as the most pressing issues facing the nation break for Obama over McCain by a decisive 18 points.

Only in comparison to such a bleak assessment could the electorate be considered upbeat about their *own* personal economic situation. Roughly half offer a positive assessment of their own finances (9% “excellent” / 42% “good”), compared to another half (49%) who rate their own finances negatively (36% “fair” / 13% “poor”).

When asked about the economic issues that will most determine their vote in November, voters cite the rising cost of gasoline and fuel (20%) and rising health care costs (17%) more than any other issue. A close second-tier of economic anxieties centers on areas where this Bush administration has also waged a frontal assault for the better part of a decade, including on the budget deficit and national debt (12%), the lack of good-paying jobs (12%), taxes (12%), and retirement security (10%).

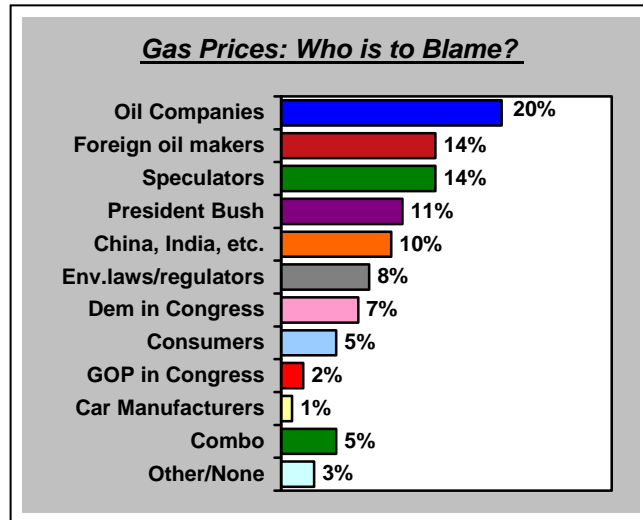
THE ENERGY CRISIS: TO DRILL OUR WAY OUT OF A HOLE?

Amid two wars in the Middle East, a flagging economy, and sharp pains at the gas pump, Americans are in the process of forming their impressions on the best ways to break the country’s addiction to oil. Not only has \$4 a gallon for gasoline (even higher for diesel) forced most Americans to reconsider and reconfigure their regular patterns of consumption, it has also forced our public officials to tackle an issue for which there is no quick fix – and thus, few honest opportunities for getting public credit. Yet that doesn’t stop some from proffering all manner of electoral gimmicks, including suspending the transportation gas tax and unlimited offshore drilling – both of which have been pilloried by economists as unable to deliver on the promise of relief at the pump, and which may actually exacerbate the problem altogether. As energy becomes one of the central fault lines in this election cycle, the demand for sensible solutions is rivaling the demand for oil.

There isn’t much consensus about how we got into this mess in the first place – and there is plenty of blame to go around. A small plurality (20%) points to the big oil companies, which, in posting record profits in multiple financial quarters, have done little to disabuse voters of the notion that they are to blame. This feeling is broad, with 22% of

Democrats, 14% of independents, and 16% of Republicans saying the big oil companies are to blame.

Yet voters also understand quite well that the price at the pump is an artifact of much more than collusion among Big Oil executives. They also point to the foreign oil producing countries (14%), oil speculators (14%), and the energy agenda of the Bush administration (11%). Fewer cite what experts at the U.S. Department of Energy have warned us for years – that the unabated, oil-fed industrialization of developing countries like China and India is a principal driver of a long-term spike in world oil prices. Just 10% of the electorate has keyed in on this global dynamic. And even though voters are less likely to say that environmental laws and regulators (8%), the Democrats in Congress (7%), they themselves (5%), Republicans in Congress (2%) or car manufacturers (1%) are to blame, these factors are all wrapped up in the story of \$4 dollar gas, too.



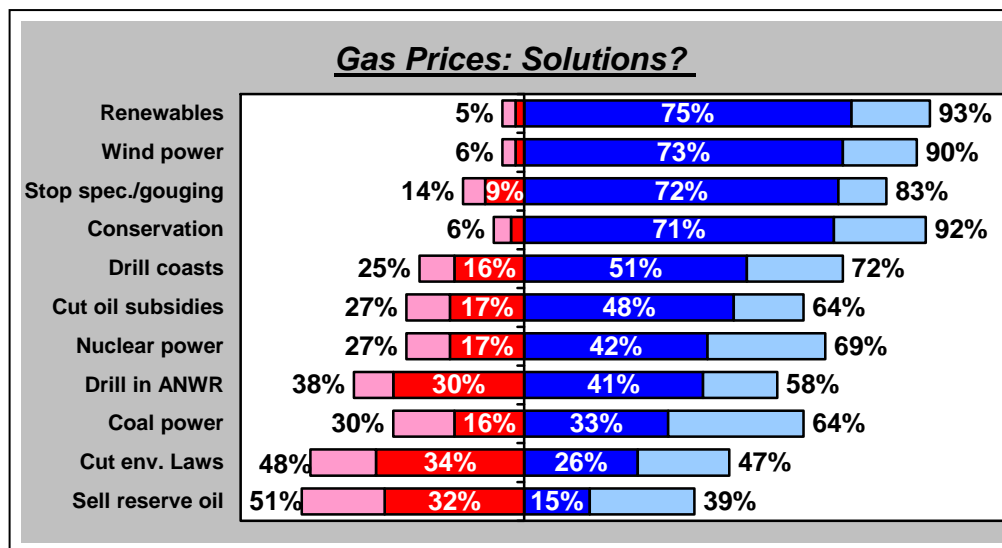
As for solutions to the energy crisis, a virtually unanimous majority (93% support / 5% oppose) says the U.S. should provide incentives for renewable energy, such as biofuels and solar power, including a whopping 75% who feel this way strongly. Similar percentages support the expansion of new wind power generating turbines (90% / 6%) and promoting energy conservation practices in homes, government, and businesses (92% / 6%). These voters also reveal a populist streak in their strongly stated desire for the government to crack down on speculators and price gouging on the part of the big oil companies (83% support / 14% oppose). Support for these initiatives crosses Party lines, with nearly indistinguishable majorities of Democrats, independents, and even Republicans supporting renewables, wind, conservation, and taking on the speculators and price gougers.

When it comes to energy, however, most voters want to do everything. And though smaller majorities support building new nuclear power plants (69% support / 27%), cutting welfare to the big oil companies (64% / 27%), and burning more coal (64% / 30%), roughly similar percentages across the partisan divide agree here as well (Democrats are only slightly more tepid in their desire to expand coal and nuclear power).

On the issue of drilling, however, consensus quickly recedes to reveal a much deeper disagreement along partisan lines. A majority (72% / 25%) supports conferring more leases on the big oil companies for offshore drilling, despite the fact that these companies already have hundreds of unused leases *and* the Department of Energy estimates that new oil supplies will impact the market in only the most marginal ways, and not for decades to come. Still, the promise of a quick fix is too hard to pass up for

politicians desperate for contributions and voters desperate for solutions. Nearly all Republicans surveyed (93%) support offshore drilling; smaller majorities of independents (68%) and Democrats (54%) support it as well. But there are limits to the drilling bonanza. An increased but more limited majority (58% / 38%) supports drilling in the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge, and the partisan divide promises to keep this proposal bottled up in committee. Republicans generally support it (83% support), independents are closer to split (56% support), and Democrats tend to oppose it (35% support).

Compared to the leading proposals for dealing with the energy pinch, cutting environmental laws (47% / 48%) and selling oil from the strategic petroleum oil reserve (40% / 51%) are both D.O.A. On the former, 65% of Republicans favor cutting environmental laws while independents are split and 66% of Democrats oppose this. On the latter, Democrats are divided and independents and Republicans oppose it.



THE WAR IN IRAQ: THE OTHER SAD LEGACY OF BUSH-MCCAIN

When Washington passed a \$168 billion dollar economic stimulus package in February, it was hailed as a triumph of bi-partisanship, even if it did little to pull our country out of its economic doldrums – its ostensible purpose. Yet in fairness, Washington was also fighting with one hand tied behind its back. 5 years and 2 trillion dollars after the Bush-McCain “cakewalk” in Iraq began, the war continues to divert billions in taxpayer dollars *weekly* into rebuilding Iraq instead of into projects that will improve our economy here at home, from investments in health care and education to renewable energy and public infrastructure. Adding further insult to the American taxpayer, Iraq is now projecting a \$79 billion dollar surplus this year while collecting interest in American banks!

Republicans can rightly claim some success in convincing Americans that the “surge” had effectively stabilized Iraq: a majority (56%) says the situation in Iraq has gotten better over the past six months (24% “stayed the same” / 15% “gotten worse”). **But Americans understand the tradeoff between guns and butter and any progress**

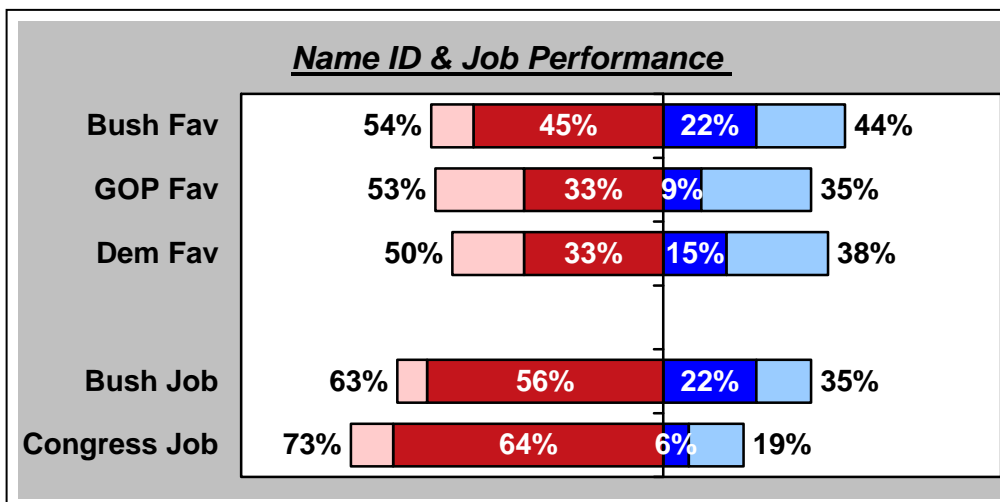
voters see has done little to alter their fundamental determination that the war was a mistake. A majority consistently says that the Iraq war is no longer worth fighting (51%), compared to 42% who say the war is worth fighting and 7% who are not quite sure. This helps explain why a consistent majority also favors withdrawing troops from Iraq (54%) – either immediately (23%) or at a date certain (31%). In contrast, 44% say we should keep forces in Iraq until the situation is confirmed to be stable.

But as with measures on the direction of the country and the state of the economy, McCain is doing a better job than Obama of consolidating voters who share his position on this issue. McCain is winning voters who support keeping forces in Iraq until the situation is confirmed to be stable, 82% to 12%. Obama is winning voters who support withdrawal, but by a narrower margin, 72% to 19%, suggesting room to grow on this critical issue.

REGARDING WASHINGTON: THE DEFICIT OF ANOTHER KIND

Voters do not suffer gladly a pocketbook recession and a war without end, nor do they suffer gladly those who created the mess. Voters continue to punish President Bush and the GOP for steering the nation into a ditch, and the Democrats are not in great favor either. It is certainly not news that Washington has an image problem, but it is worth noting the growing bitterness with which voters regard the President and the two Parties.

President Bush is not a lame duck, so much as he is an albatross around the neck of Republicans, dragging his Party to new depths. He continues to be radioactive for both John McCain and GOP candidates further down the ballot. Nearly two-thirds (63%) disapprove of Bush’s job performance (56% strongly disapprove), including 96% of Democrats (3% approve), 66% of independents (29% approve), and even 27% of his own Party (69% approve). Overall, just 35 percent of voters approve of Bush’s job (22% strongly approve). Voters are only slightly less malign in their impressions of Bush as a person (44% fav / 54% unfav). As with his job performance ratings, Democrats (8%, 90%) and a solid majority of independents (39%, 59%) disapprove of Bush the man. Republicans are far more forgiving (82%, 16%).



Bush can take some solace in the fact that voters are even more critical of Congress than they are of him. Both Parties sport solidly unfavorable image ratings. **Only about one-third (35%) holds a favorable impression of the GOP in Congress (9% very favorable), compared to a majority (53%) who offer an unflattering assessment (33% very unfavorable)** (May: 31% favorable / 56% unfavorable). Majorities of Democrats (10% favorable / 80% unfavorable) and independents (28% / 53%) are unfavorable toward the GOP, while an underwhelming majority of Republicans (64% / 26%) are kind toward their own.

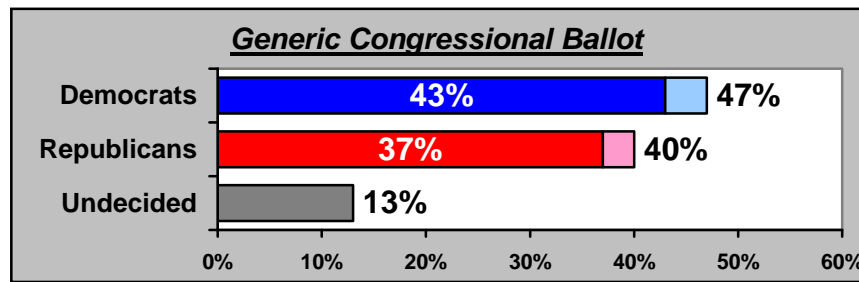
Democrats in Congress also suffer from a marked deficit of public esteem. Thirty-eight percent are favorable toward the Democrats (15% very favorable), compared to half who are not (33% very unfavorable) (May: 42% favorable / 46% unfavorable). The Democratic base is slightly more forgiving of their own than Republicans are of theirs (69% / 19%), while independents (25% / 59%) and Republicans (12% / 78%) are solidly unfavorable toward the Democrats.

It is even harder for voters to offer positive assessments of the job that Congress is doing as a collective institution, though it is worth noting that more than one-quarter of likely voters (27%) still believe the GOP controls Congress. It should be particularly troubling to incumbents of every stripe that only 19% think Congress is doing a good job (6% very / 13% smwht), compared to a whopping 73% who disapprove of Congress's job performance (64% very / 10% smwht). What is more, this feeling traverses Party lines: majorities of Democrats (64% disapprove / 26% approve), independents (76% / 18%), and Republicans (81% / 13%) all say that Congress is falling well short of expectations.

Taken together, these trends can scarcely be considered positive for the Democrats, despite their continued advantage on the generic congressional ballot. In May, Democrats owned a 13-point advantage in positive image ratings over their GOP counterparts among independents (33% favorable to 20% favorable, respectively), and an 11-point advantage in terms of Party enthusiasm (69% of Democrats liked Democrats, compared to 58% of the same for Republicans). Today, the advantage among independents has evaporated (25% to 28%, respectively), while the advantage among the Party faithful is down to just 5 points (69% to 64%, respectively).

CONTROLLING CONGRESS: BACKBENCHERS LOOKING FOR LIGHT SWITCH

Despite voters casting a pox on both houses, the dynamics of support at the Congressional level has remained unchanged for the better part of two years: voters prefer to keep the GOP out of power by a decisive margin. **Currently, Democrats lead the GOP by 7 points, 47 percent (43% solid) to 40 percent (37% solid), with 13 percent undecided.** Recall that in September of 2006, less than two months before the Democrats dominated the GOP in races nationally, the Democrats held an 8-point advantage over the GOP in our Battleground survey. And the lead has hovered consistently around this margin ever since: 7 points in July, 2007; 5 points in December, 2007; 10 points in May, 2008; and 7 points today. **At this point in the cycle, the conditions look encouraging for Democratic successes.**



The Democrats' winning coalition represents a mix of traditional Democratic base voters and key swing regional and demographic segments of the electorate. Regionally, the Democrats own leads in the Northeast (+23), South Central (+12), and West (+11), as well as in contested states (+7) and Kerry states (+24). The Republicans command advantages in the South (+12) and Central Plains (+5). Elsewhere regionally, the race is neck-and-neck, including in the Midwest (+2), Mountain States (+2), toss-up states (+3), and Bush states (+1).

Among key demographic subgroups, Democrats command advantages among "Reagan" Democrats (+76), women (+22), Hispanics (+20), and white women (+10). **Democrats also lead Republicans among every age, educational, religious attendance, and marital cohort, save seniors (-7) married men (-24), college educated men (-17), and weekly church attendees (-19).** Democrats also lead among the huge majority that thinks the U.S. is pretty seriously off on the wrong track (+30), as well as voters who say the economy and jobs (+32) and the war in Iraq (+51) are the most pressing issues facing the country. In contrast, Republicans take men 45+ (+13), seniors (+7), white men (+21), college men (+14), married men (+24), weekly church attendees (+19), and voters who say gas and energy prices are the most important issues facing the nation (+28).

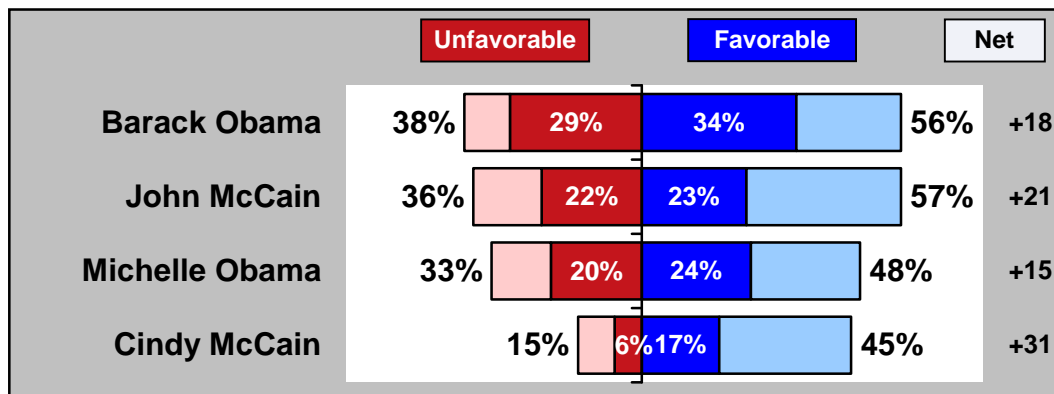
There is also a sizeable enthusiasm gap between the two Parties. At this point in the race, Democrats maintain a decisive edge over the GOP in their ability to convert the Party faithful: 89% of Democrats vote Democratic (4% defect to the GOP), compared to 79% of the same for Republicans (10% defect to the Democrats). Independents are split (33% GOP / 32% Democrat).

The undecided vote is modest at 13%, and the demographic profile of these voters suggests they will be tough for either side to attract. These voters skew toward women (57%), voters over the age of 45 (79%), blue-collar voters (57%), independents (44%), married voters (63%), regular church attendees (50%), non-fundamentalist/born-again voters (53%), whites (75%), and suburban voters (59%). Attitudinally, they look more promising for the Democrats. Undecided voters want change, with over eight-in-ten (81%) pessimistic about the direction of the country. Jobs and the economy (21%) are the issues about which they are most concerned, and a majority (57%) says the economy is poor. And a majority (56%) thinks the war in Iraq is not worth fighting. These voters are slightly more critical of Democrats (25% fav / 54% unfav) than Republicans (27% / 48%), though they hold warmer opinions of Obama (56% / 28%) than McCain (51% / 31%).

IMAGES OF OUR NEXT PRESIDENT: THE “CHANGE”(ING) CANDIDATE(S)

With fewer than 80 days until the November election, voters are still getting to know the two “presumptive” major Party nominees – Barack Obama and John McCain. Both candidates are positioning themselves as *the* candidate of “change,” yet their tasks could not be more dissimilar. McCain must contend with the fact that he is a fixture of Washington and a reliable Bush-Republican at a time when voters are looking for neither. He also needs to speak convincingly to voters’ concerns over the economy, gas prices, and health care – issues where voters are nervous about his ability to lead in the right direction. Obama, for his part, must assure voters that his brand of change is the right one to make the country safe and prosperous in the 21st century, amid a Republican smear campaign designed to play on latent xenophobia, racism, and fear. Most important, Obama must prove that he is ready to lead.

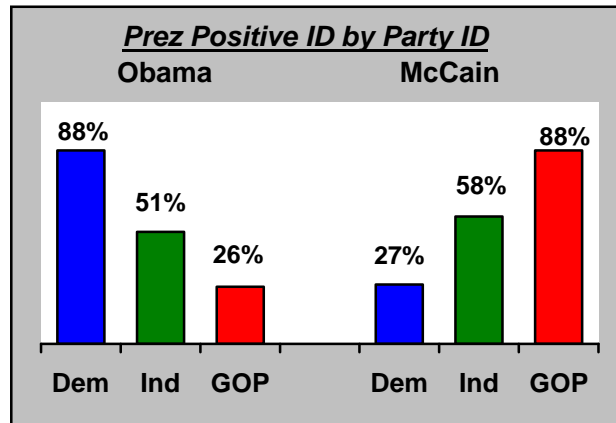
As expected, both candidates have seen their favorable-to-unfavorable ratios drop from the stratospheric levels that prevailed during the Primary season. **On the Democratic side, Barack Obama** continues to enjoy solidly net-favorable name identification (56% fav / 38% unfav), and the intensity of opinion leans in his favor as well (34% very fav / 29% very unfav) (May: 54% fav, 40% unfav). Majorities of Democrats (88% fav / 8% unfav) and independents (51% / 36%) hold Obama in high regard, as do as over a quarter of Republicans (26% / 70%). Obama is also viewed net-favorably by critical demographic subgroups, including among women (+29), rural voters (+2), whites (+4), Hispanics (+46), independents (+15), and blue-collar men (+8) and women (+12). Back in May, the central challenge for Obama was consolidating his base; he has nearly done that (88% fav among Democrats, up from 75%). Now, he must work to bring independents back into his camp (51% fav, down from 58%).



On the Republican side, John McCain owns a similar, net-positive favorability rating (57% fav / 36% unfav), though there is noticeably less intensity to his profile (23% very fav / 22% very unfav) (May: 54% fav / 39% unfav). Like Obama, McCain is finally getting his own house in order (88% fav / 8% unfav). McCain has also started to break through with independents (58% / 29%), among whom he is now viewed more favorably than Obama. Even a quarter of Democrats like McCain (27% / 67%). Still, while both McCain and Obama are performing equally in terms of consolidating their respective Parties (88% favorable for each), McCain needs to increase his favorability among

groups that will likely prove decisive in this election, including women (+10 compared to +29) and Hispanics (+9 compared to +46).

The Obama campaign needs to start defining the race along the lines of which candidate is better prepared to represent the middle class, fight for ordinary Americans, be independent, and unite the country. Obama is leading on all these dimensions, including among independent voters. McCain has dominant advantages on being “a strong leader,” and – at least among independent voters – “saying what he believes” and “sharing your values.” The two candidates are about evenly tied on who “will get things done.” (See Appendix)

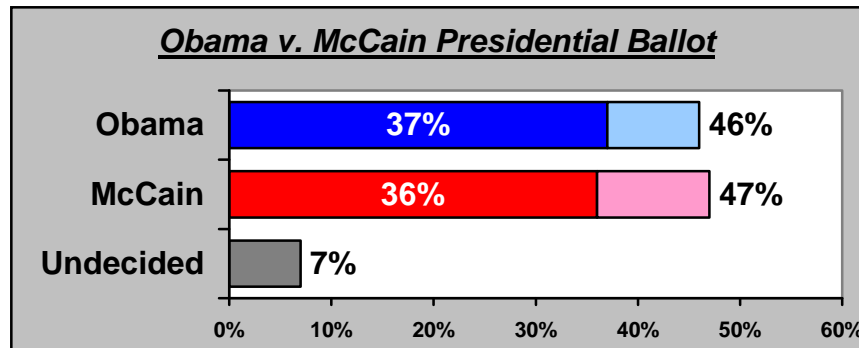


When it comes to the issues, Obama has commanding advantages on “handling the health care issue” and “creating jobs and improving the economy.” McCain leads Obama by a dominant margin on “dealing with the war in Iraq.” The two candidates are rated competitively on the questions of who will “keep America prosperous” and who “can reduce gas and energy prices,” though independents appear to favor McCain on both counts. Prosperity has historically been one of the strongest predictors of the vote. At the same time, while it will be tempting for Obama to concentrate the campaign only on domestic economic issues, that would be a major misreading of the data. Obama cannot allow McCain to continue to hold his advantages on Iraq, and according to our past Battleground polls, matters of national security more broadly – just ask President Kerry.

It will be well worth tracking the candidates’ images over the following weeks, as McCain may start to pay a price for the nasty turn his campaign has taken, particularly since it flies in the face of the promise he made to run an honorable race. Among voters overall, roughly four-in-ten say they are more likely to vote for each candidate based on what they have heard (Obama: 42% more / 46% less; McCain: 43% more / 46% less). **But by a wide margin voters also think that McCain has waged the more negative campaign (50% McCain / 21% Obama).** Among independent voters, McCain is seen as the more negative campaigner by 24 points (42% to 18%). The difference is even wider among those who are undecided on the Presidential ballot; McCain is viewed as the more negative campaigner by 34 points (41% to 7%). However, if we needed any more evidence that negative campaigning works, independent voters are 2 points more likely to vote for McCain based on what they heard of him (41% more / 39% less) compared to 8 points less likely to vote for Obama (35% / 43%).

THE RACE FOR THE WHITE HOUSE: ANOTHER DEAD HEAT

Despite what otherwise promises to be a banner year for the Democrats, the presidential ballot remains, as it was in May, a statistical dead heat. Under the most conservative estimate of turnout, **McCain leads Obama by 1 point, 47% to 46%, with just 7% undecided** (May: 49% Obama / 46% McCain). Obama continues to lead McCain in terms of strong support, 37% to 36%, but this advantage is well within the margin of error.



This represents a traditional turnout model. Obama's ace in the hole, however, is his ability to change the electorate. With even a modest increase in the youth vote, Obama moves to a 3-point lead over McCain (48% to 45%).

The gender, age, race, and marriage gaps continue to be the clear fault lines in this race. Obama leads decisively among women (+13), particularly college educated (+19) and unmarried women (+27). Men go for McCain by 18 points, and the Republican nominee performs especially well among white men (+35), college educated men (+21), and married men (+32). Obama is the candidate for voters under 65, especially women under 45 (+26), while McCain takes voters over 65 by 15 points, most notably men over 45 (+21).

The enthusiasm gap benefits both candidates, depending on how you look at it. In terms of Party consolidation – the standard measure of enthusiasm – both candidates convert the same number of their Party faithful (87% for McCain / 86% for Obama). Other measures point in different directions. On the one hand, McCain converts 91% of voters who are supporting Republicans on the generic Congressional ballot, compared to 83% of the same for Obama. McCain also does a much better job of converting the support of his former GOP rivals, Mike Huckabee and Mitt Romney (90% support for each), while Obama still labors to win the favor of Clinton supporters (74%). Among those supporters, 19% are for McCain and 7% are undecided – yet that may change after the convention. On the other hand, **Democrats are much more satisfied with the field of candidates than are Republicans (70% to 44% satisfied, respectively), suggesting some lingering disaffection with McCain's nomination.** Ironically, Republicans also suffer from a “deficit of faith:” only 57% of Republicans think McCain will prevail in November, compared to 76% of Democrats who think Obama will win. At this point, we simply do not know who will show up, and who will stay home, on November 4th.

It is much more difficult for McCain to solidify his partisan support among Republicans while simultaneously appealing to the swing voters. On measure after measure of the economy, the war, and the direction of the country, Republican voters are the outliers and Democrats and independents resemble each other much more.

Regionally, Obama and McCain continue to split the key battlegrounds.

Obama leads in the Northeast (+22) and West (+8), while McCain takes the Midwest (+3), South (+19), South Central (+6), Central Plains (+19), and Mountain States (+6). The only region to flip for McCain since May is the Central Plains, which has the second smallest sample size of the regional breaks in the poll. Obama also leads in Kerry states (+11), contested states (+2), states with two Democratic senators (+3), and in urban areas (+12). In contrast, McCain assumes a lead in Bush states (+14), states with two GOP senators (+3), states with a mixed Senate delegation (+9), and voters in rural areas (+17). Rural areas have since flipped McCain's way, and voters in suburban areas are split (+1 McCain).

The undecided vote stands at 7 percent. Demographically, the undecided vote appears to favor McCain, if only slightly. The profile of the undecided vote leans toward voters over the age of 45 (84%), blue-collar voters (66%), independents (48%), married voters (66%), regular church attendees (52%), non-fundamentalist/born-again voters (57%), whites (77%), and suburban voters (51%). Additionally, fewer women (51%) comprise the bloc of undecideds (compared to 57% on the congressional ballot). However, undecided voters are much easier for Obama – they are solidly in a change-oriented mood. Fully 86% think the country is headed off on the wrong track, a majority (56%) say the war in Iraq is not worth fighting and that the economy is poor (63%), the economy and jobs are their top concerns (21%), and they are far more favorable toward Obama (50% fav / 30% unfav) than McCain (42% / 33%). Traditionally, undecided voters who are this dissatisfied break against the Party in power.

Perhaps the most substantial change since May is in the contours of support among swing voters. Obama has seen his support erode considerably among independents in this span, among whom he led McCain by 14 points but now finds himself trailing by 10 points (45% McCain / 35% Obama / 20% undecided). At the same time, however, Obama has cut McCain's substantial 36-point lead among undecided voters on the generic Congressional ballot to a mere 2 points (36% McCain / 34% Obama / 30% undecided). Obama also continues to maintain decisive advantages among Hispanics (+33), women (+13), and every religious cohort with the exception of weekly church attendees (-30). Obama is also noticeably competitive among blue-collar white women under 55 (-4) and blue-collar white men under 55 (-15).

While Obama has not fully consolidated the “change” vote, he is still holding significant advantages on key metrics, including among voters who cite jobs and the economy (+18) and the war in Iraq (+42) as the most pressing issues facing the country, those who say the country is pretty seriously off on the wrong track (+24), and those who say the war in Iraq is no longer worth fighting (+52).

In conclusion, John McCain is making the presidential race a real contest.

The race will be close, and the trends over the past three months favor McCain somewhat. The central challenge for Obama is to start defining the choice in this race on his terms and putting McCain on defense. This starts with the convention and involves connecting with voters viscerally on the economy, and outlining what is at stake with a McCain presidency. It also means eroding McCain's formidable advantage on matters of national security. His myriad vulnerabilities on this front – from his confused impetuosity in engaging nations (e.g. Russia and Iraq) to his support for Bush's policies on existing threats to America (e.g. al Qaeda in Afghanistan and Pakistan) – have yet to receive a spotlight.

APPENDIX: OBAMA AND MCCAIN TRAITS

