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Not So Fast Mr. Obama

BATTLEGROUND XXXV

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Republican Strategic Analysis

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OVERVIEW

Many Americans, and perhaps observers from around the world, seem to be convinced that Barack Obama is the next President of the United States – as if there were no election this fall and the voters did not have a choice to make. This attitude is one that has permeated the pundits, the media and some critics contend even the Democratic nominee's campaign. But it is not true.

Barack Obama looks like a President; he walks and talks like a President; he travels abroad like a President; he visits foreign governments like a President -- but the voters of this country have yet to make him their President.

We are in the midst of an economic downturn in this country. Many Americans are clearly struggling economically. For most of us, our single biggest investment is our home – the value of which many of us have seen plummet over the past few years. For many, concern about health care is no longer a concern about the availability of coverage but rather whether they will be able to continue to afford coverage. The nation is embroiled in a war that we are not too sure how to get out of or if we have met our objectives – to the degree that we believe we ever had any.

Presiding over all of this is a President who has one of the lowest approval ratings in history. He happens to be a Republican. And although people still like him at a personal level, they took their wrath out on his party during the last election. Of course, many of those in the President's party had gone on a bit of a spending spree despite their rhetoric to the contrary. But people – and Republican politicians are people too – do weird things when they can see doom and gloom on the horizon. The Republican brand may have only been weaker during the days after Watergate.

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So perhaps we should not be too shocked when most observers think Barack Obama is going to be the next President. Indeed, a simple majority (51%) of the voters think Mr. Obama will be the next President according to our latest survey (*Battleground XXXV*). So why then is John McCain actually ahead in the latest Battleground survey, leading 47% to Obama's 46% on the ballot? In the May 2008 Battleground survey, Obama held a 3 point lead on the ballot against McCain. Shouldn't Barack Obama be even further ahead given the current political environment? Shouldn't Barack Obama be capturing at least a majority of the vote today? There is clearly something at work holding up support for McCain and holding back support for Obama.

The 2008 presidential campaign is far from over. As this survey reveals, of the 13 attributes tested between the two candidates, John McCain enjoys an advantage on half of them. Indeed, McCain has seen improvement on every comparative attribute repeated in this study save one – and it is the one in which McCain enjoys his most commanding lead (the war in Iraq). This positive re-evaluation of John McCain (in comparison to Barack Obama) is the untold story of the last three months of this election.

John McCain's biggest comparative gain over the last three months has come on the issue of gas and energy prices. A plurality of voters now see him as able to do a better job on this issue. His score increased 9 points over the last three months on which of the candidates would do a better job on the energy and gas issue. At the same time, Obama dropped 13 points on this issue.

Voters have not decided who the next President will be, but they seem well on the way to doing so. While most would agree that Barack Obama has enjoyed the spotlight over the last three months, it does not appear to have paid off in any appreciable way. As voters have focused on Barack Obama, they seem to not be buying what he is selling. Further, they are not buying what Obama is selling with regard to the most important issues of the day – energy, the economy and the war.

Even though gas and energy prices are certainly the issue of the day, we pointed out in the last Battleground analysis that the most important attribute for a candidate to “own” by Election Day is which one will “keeping America prosperous.” History suggests that a Democratic candidate needs a lead on “keeping America prosperous” in order to spend his next four years in the White House. Although McCain was 6 points down on this measure three months ago, the candidates are in a dead heat today -- at 43%. Obama still has the lead on jobs and the economy, but McCain has made notable improvements on this issue.

The generic ballot has improved a bit for Republicans at the Congressional level over the last three months. Part of this could be attributable to a strong campaign now being run at the Presidential level, which may be helping voters to move beyond the Bush years. Voters are turning their attention away from the Bush administration and towards the Presidential election this fall.

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In our last Battleground survey, we found that a plurality of voters believed that Republicans were running the federal government, but in this latest survey a majority of the voters (56%) do understand that the Democrats are running the U.S. Congress. Issues like gas and energy prices, where voters are interested in doing something to lower prices, are helping voters recognize that the liberals are in charge -- and they are not doing what voters want. This realization may do the most to help Republicans make it through the 2008 election cycle.

It is heartening to note that while President George W. Bush's job approval is down to 35%, the job approval for Congress is down to just 19%. Further, while Democrats in Congress used to be viewed in a more favorable light than Republicans in Congress, their name identification advantage has vanished over the last three months. As we enter the final days before the convention process, Republicans should be pleased with what they see on the horizon. Perhaps this will embolden them for the difficult election which lies ahead.

A POCKETBOOK VIEW COMES INTO FOCUS

The national feeling of malaise continues. Three-quarters (75%) of the electorate remains convinced that our nation is off on the wrong track and 63% feel strongly about it. Among Republicans, 57% think the nation is off on the wrong track, but the figure rises to 73% among ticket-splitters and 93% among Democrats.

But it is one thing to state that voters are frustrated with our direction and quite another to suppose that they want change for the sake of change alone. Even when voters are nervous about what will happen in their lives, it does not mean that they will not be concerned about what shape that change takes. Nor does it mean that they are willing to be led by someone who has no idea what that change might look like or how to get there.

Only 14% of the electorate thinks that our economy is either "excellent" or "good" – a figure unchanged since the previous survey. But the percentage of those who think the current economy is "poor" has dropped from 56% to 50% – a modest improvement.

But when it comes to their own lives, voters feel markedly different. A majority of the voters (51%) think that their own personal economic situation is either "excellent" or "good." One might surmise that McCain's supporters harbor this feeling, but it also extends to a wide plurality of the electorate. But there are exceptions and they include Florida and New York residents, minority voters, female Democrats, conservative Democrats, and single women.

So, while concerned about the overall direction of the economy and the direction of the nation, most voters still feel invested in the world around them. They are, by definition,

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frustrated, but are not willing to “throw the baby out with the bath water.” Even a majority of union voters view their own economic situation in a positive light.

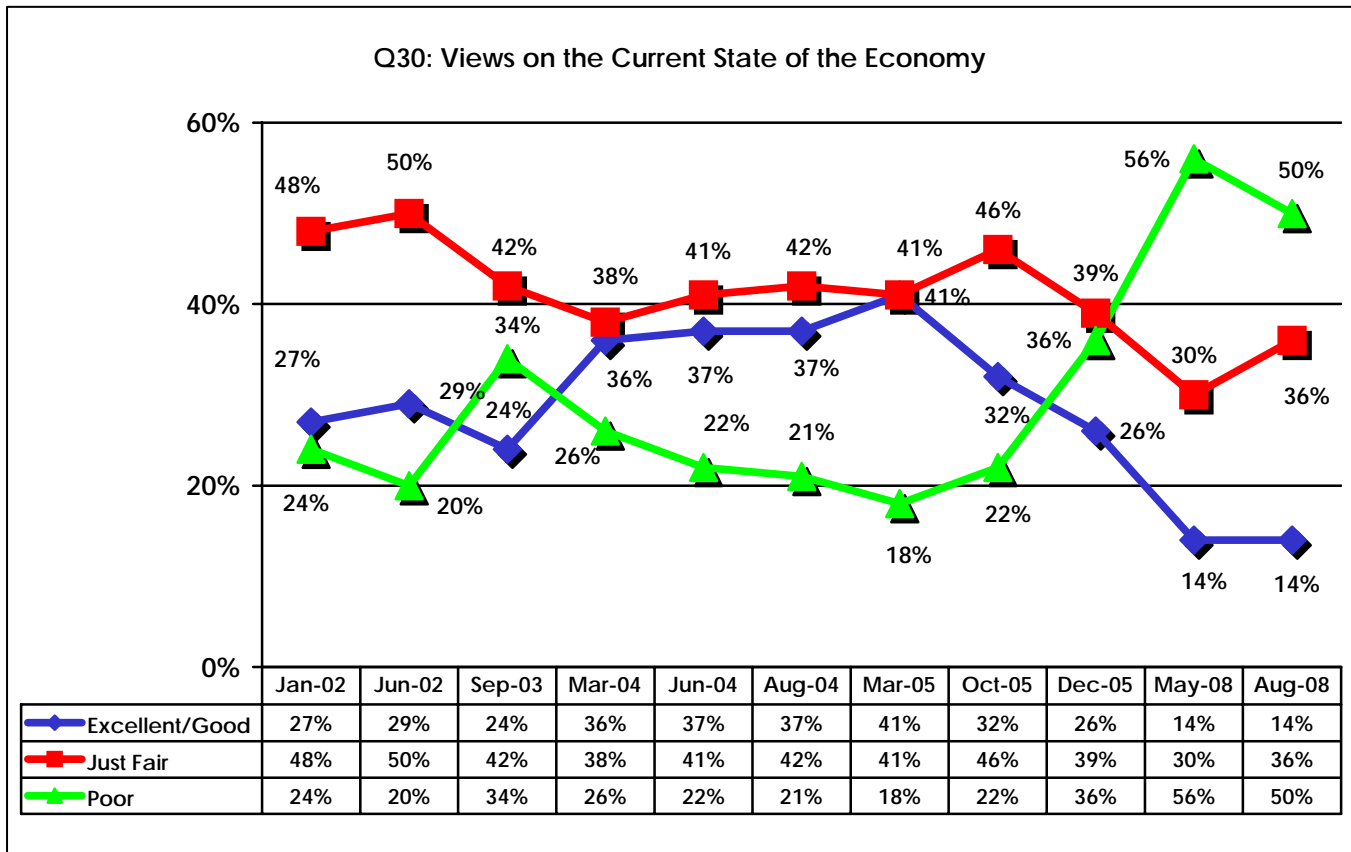
Still, voters remain quite concerned, as we have seen. Pocketbook and economic issues are likely to dominate their vote making decision when it comes to casting their ballot for President. When voters are focused on pocketbook concerns, it is hard for them to think about any other issue without looking through the prism of those overriding concerns. For instance, when they think about health care, the focus is on cost. When they think about education, the focus is on whether their child will be able to get a job with the skills he or she learns in high school.

Respondents were asked what current economic issue is most important in determining their vote for President. Their concerns run the gamut, but begin with the rising cost of gasoline and fuel (20%). Those most focused on this matter include rural residents, 30-39 year olds, younger men, younger independents, the very conservative, non-college men, Dads, and those with a lower education level.

Next on the list is the rising cost of health care at 17%. These voters are more likely to include seniors, but also Hispanic men, Democrats and ticket-splitters. Higher taxes, lack of jobs that pay a living wage, and the federal budget and national debt all come in at 12% each. Concern about actually losing a job showed up at merely 4% -- the lowest response of the list provided.

But despite the fact that few are worried about losing their own job, nearly half (46%) have either dealt with a job loss for either themselves (9%) or a friend (8%), family member (20%), co-worker (1%), or a combination thereof (5%). This is a staggering figure and reinforces the view that this economy is not just an anxiety economy, but an economy where many are experiencing real loss.

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The voters themselves believe that there is a recession going on in America. In fact, we have rarely shown lower ratings for the economy. All but 15% of voters see the U.S. economy in a downturn and only 5% see us as either “strong and growing” or “in a recovery.” On the opposite side, more than a third of voters see our economy as either in a recession (29%) or depression (7%). When we add in those who feel the economy is approaching a recession, the negative view grows to 59%. Working women, young people, African Americans, minority women, Democrats, Independent women, those who are single and those who do not attend church are all more likely to hold this negative view of the economy.

Nearly half (49%) of respondents believe the most important issue for the U.S. Congress to work on is pocketbook related. The top issue on this list is the economy and jobs (24%). Those most likely to be focused on the economy and jobs tend to be living in identified “toss-up states,” urban areas, working women, under 40 years of age, younger women, African Americans, minority women, Democrats, liberals, college women, unmarried women, Moms and those less likely to attend church.

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The other big pocketbook issue is gas and energy prices. Fifteen percent (15%) of the voters want Congress to work on this issue. These voters are more likely to include white men, Hispanic men, Republicans, the very conservative, Dads, active Fundamentalist/Pentecostal voters and white conservative Christians. By comparison, the mortgage crisis only shows up at 1% as a top issue for the Congress.

Security issues are only mentioned by 26% of the voters as the top thing for Congress to work on. Chief among these issues remains the war in Iraq at 12%. African American men, Democrat men, Democrats, liberals, and white non-conservative Christians are all more likely to mention the war issue. But even among each of these subgroups, the top issue remains the economy and jobs – so the war has faded to a secondary concern even among groups that are more likely to be focused upon it.

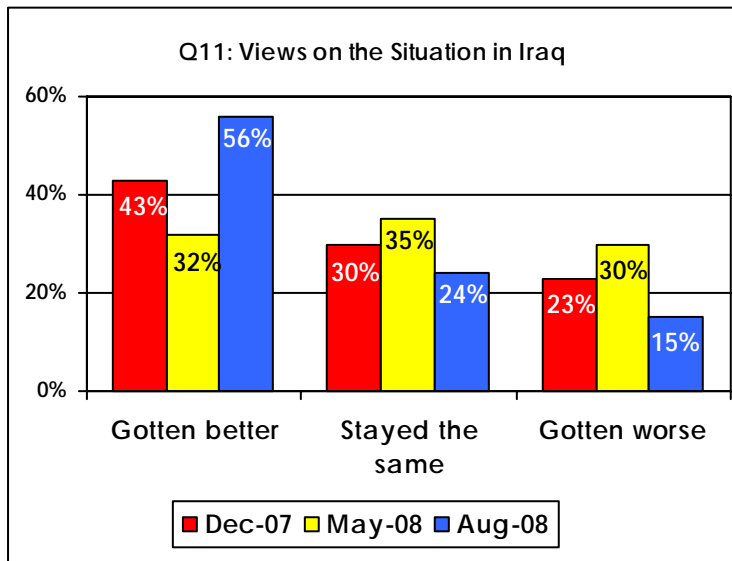
In the last Battleground analysis, we talked about how as the war had dropped from the headlines, the Democratic candidates for President had been able to define much of the discussion. But negative views of the war have actually dropped since the debate has become a singular one between John McCain and Barack Obama. A majority still think the war in Iraq has not been worth fighting, but it is now only a simple majority (51%). This represents a 5 point drop for those opposed to the war.

Opposition to the war has dropped considerably among Independents over the last three months. Three months ago, Independents were against the war, as 32% said it was worth it and 63% said it was not worth it. Today, Independents are split, as 46% think the war has been worth it and 43% think it has not been worth it. Republicans and Democrats remain nearly as divided as they were three months ago.

The larger change has come regarding voter views of the last six months in Iraq. Three months ago, voters were equally divided between their view that the situation in Iraq had gotten better (32%), gotten worse (30%) or stayed the same (35%). Today, a majority (56%) believe the situation in Iraq has gotten better and only 15% believe that the situation has gotten worse. Those most likely to believe that things have gotten better include men, seniors, white men, Republicans, Independent men, conservatives, married men, Dads, Catholics, Fundamentalist/Pentecostal voters, and white conservative Christians.

Among Republicans, 78% believe the situation in Iraq has gotten better over the last six months. Among Independents, 60% believe that the situation has gotten better in Iraq. Among Democrats, 35% think things have gotten better in Iraq and only 26% think things have gotten worse. Three months ago, a plurality of Democrats (46%) thought that things had gotten worse in Iraq over the previous six months.

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What has not changed in the last three months is the view of U.S. strategy in Iraq on the part of the American electorate. Voters are now even more committed to the view that “the U.S. should keep it forces in Iraq until our 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.” Today, 44% of the voters hold this view, up from 40% in the previous survey. This view reaches a majority with seniors, Republicans, conservatives, whites,

college men and those who attend church, as well as several other groups.

Still, a majority of American voters are either calling for an immediate withdrawal of all troops from Iraq (23%) or feel that the U.S. should “set a date, no more than two years from now, when all troops will be withdrawn from Iraq and start bringing some troops home immediately (31%).” Despite the radical shift in voters’ views of the last six months of the war, the overall view about our strategy in Iraq has changed very little

Respondents were asked who is the most responsible for the high cost of gas today. It is interesting how few voters blame the President. When given a list, only 11% blame President Bush first. Young women, minorities and Democrats are among the more likely to blame Bush.

The top culprit for the high cost of gas is seen as oil companies, but even they are only blamed by 20% of the electorate. The others likely to be held responsible include foreign oil producing countries (14%), speculators (14%) and other nations like China, India and developing nations (10%). Speculators are a particular target among the investor class -- older men, 60-69 year olds, and married men.

Respondents were asked to evaluate a long list of potential sources of domestic energy. The most popular among these were incentives for renewable energy sources, like wind, solar and geothermal (93% favor), promoting energy conservation practices (92%), building new wind power generating turbines (90%), cracking down on speculators and price gouging (83%), drilling for oil and natural gas off the Atlantic coastline (72%), and building new nuclear power plants to generate electricity (69%).

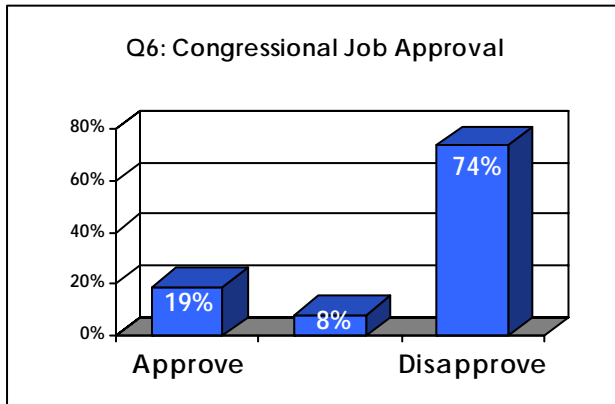
It is interesting to note that one of the least popular ideas was drilling for oil and natural gas in ANWR. Only 58% were in favor of this option and 39% were against it. Easing

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environmental restrictions and selling oil from the strategic petroleum reserve are both even less popular than ANWR among the list of options.

THE HONEYMOON COMES TO AN END

Nancy Pelosi and Harry Reid may think they know what is best for the country, but ignoring the will of the electorate on things like drilling for oil comes at a price. Whatever honeymoon period may have been left to the Democrats, they have certainly



frittered it away. Today, only 19% of the electorate approves of the job that Congress is doing for them. This may be the lowest job approval ever recorded for Congress.

Seventy-four percent (74%) of American voters disapprove of Congress' performance and 64% feel strongly about it. Negative opinions of Congress

become almost universal among older men (82%), seniors (81%), white male seniors (90%), Republican men (87%), Independent men (83%), moderates (82%), very conservative (83%), Fundamentalist/Pentecostal voters (81%), white conservative Christians (81%) and NRA members and supports (82%). Among Independents, 18% approve of Congress and 76% disapprove. Among Democrats, 27% approve of Congress and 64% disapprove.

The problem for the Democratic Party is that voters are only too aware that they control the U.S. Congress. In our last survey, we found that a plurality of voters (48%) held the view that the Republican Party controlled the federal government, while only 30% thought the Democratic Party was in control. In this survey we asked which political party voters thought controlled the U.S. Congress.

A solid majority (56%) are aware that the Democratic Party is in control of the U.S. Congress. Comparatively, only 27% still think the Republican Party is in control of Congress. The biggest problem for Democrats is that among Independent voters, 16% think Republicans are in control and 57% think the Democrats are in control.

Democrats themselves are among the least likely to think that they are in control of Congress. Among Democrats, 42% think Republicans are in control of Congress and 36% think the Democrats are in control. Among Republicans, 11% think Republicans are in control and 78% are aware that the Democrats are in control.

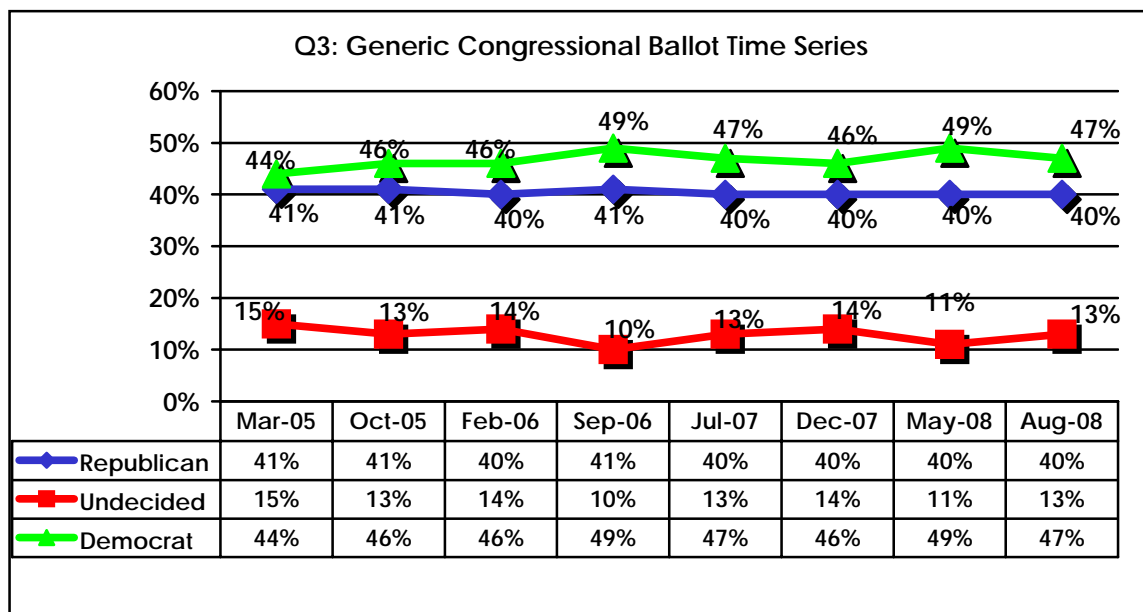
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Of course, the President’s own job approval is not exactly high. Just 35% of the American electorate approves of the job George W. Bush is doing in office – but that is actually an improvement from his approval level three months ago. Bush is now not as relevant for voters as they focus on the contest between McCain and Obama.

Sixty-three percent (63%) of American voters still disapprove of President Bush’s performance in office and 56% feel strongly about it. This is still a universal view (94%) among Democrats. But Republicans remain supportive of their President by more than a two-to-one margin, as 66% approve and 30% disapprove. Among Independents, the President’s approval is 29% and 66% disapprove – a mirror image of his base.

It is important to note, as we have in the past, that history is likely to be kind to George W. Bush. Once out of office, Presidents tend to be judged more for the content of their character rather than the success or failure of their policies. Fifty-seven percent (57%) continue to approve of the President at a personal level and only 36% disapprove.

A majority of voters (54%) continue to hold an unfavorable opinion of the Republicans in Congress, while only 35% hold a favorable opinion. But this was the case by the end of the 2006 election cycle and has not been altered since.



This same opinion now holds for the Democrats in Congress. As recently as three months ago, voters viewed the Democrats in Congress with a 42% favorable opinion and a 46% unfavorable opinion. It wasn’t a positive view, but it did not match their opinion of Republicans. Today, a majority of the voters hold a negative view of the Democrats in Congress as 39% are favorable and 50% are unfavorable. Perhaps this is the natural result of voters coming to understand that the Democrats are now in charge.

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The net result of all of this is a generic ballot for U.S. Congress that remains tough for Republicans, although it has improved over the last three months. Similar to the 2006 elections, Republicans are still facing a 7 point deficit on the generic ballot. The fact that McCain is doing so well in a political environment which so favors the Democratic Party is a true testament to the strength of his candidacy. It is the hope of many Republicans that as the Bush years come to a close and the McCain campaign hits full steam, that this will have a beneficiary impact on the generic ballot.

One of the reasons Republicans should remain hopeful about this is that the problem is not among Independents, as Independent voters are literally divided between the two parties. The problem is that Republicans are less dedicated to electing their own candidates in comparison to Democrats for their own party. That intensity deficit may be something that can be fixed as the election approaches.

AND THEN THERE WERE TWO

It is amazing how similar the image scores appear to be for both Barack Obama and John McCain. If Obama is this agent of change that America has been waiting for, why is his image no better than the nominee from the other party -- a political party whose brand is supposed to be so badly damaged? If Obama is a foregone conclusion for living in the White House, why do voters not see the two candidates as fundamentally different? The reality is that both candidates are seen in a similar positive light and that it has been that way for awhile.

Fifty-seven percent (57%) of the voters hold John McCain in a favorable light and 36% view him unfavorably. Further, McCain is not particularly identified with his own party. Indeed, some are even aware that he has bucked his own party – and not just on occasion.

McCain is often seen as an independent politician. Independents, as a result, view him even more positively than the overall electorate. Among Independents, 58% hold a favorable opinion of John McCain and 29% hold an unfavorable opinion.

Many have noted that the key to McCain's strength is seniors. Among seniors, 64% are favorable and 29% are unfavorable. It might be hard for the pundits, the press and those outside of this country to understand, but John McCain's image is actually more positive than Barack Obama's. Again, the voters have known him for a lot longer and they certainly know more about him.

The presidential campaign started early this cycle. But back in January of last year, only 79% of the voters had even heard of Barack Obama and only about two-thirds had a fixed opinion of him. Today, 57% are favorable toward Obama and 39% are unfavorable.

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But Obama has peculiar image problems within some subgroups of the electorate. His image is upside down in the Southern region of the country, where 45% are favorable and 48% are unfavorable. Among white men, 44% are favorable and 51% are unfavorable. Even among seniors, the group most likely to vote in any election, 46% are favorable toward Obama and 46% are unfavorable. Among white conservative Christians, 22% are favorable and 74% are unfavorable.

While McCain's image is actually better than the overall electorate among Independents, the same cannot be said for Barack Obama. Among Independents, 51% are favorable toward Obama and 36% are unfavorable.

But among young people, Obama shines. Among 18-34 year olds, 74% are favorable toward Barack Obama and 25% are unfavorable. Working women are very positive as well, among whom 70% are favorable and 25% are unfavorable. For an individual who is described in his own literature as someone who will unite the country, the voters seem to have a very divided view about Barack Obama.

Barack Obama's wife, Michelle Obama, is also well known. Ninety-eight percent (98%) of the voters have heard of her. Forty-eight percent (48%) of the voters hold a favorable impression of Michelle Obama and 33% hold an unfavorable opinion. Her image reflects her husband's image vulnerabilities, although less severely.

In the South, 40% are favorable toward Michelle Obama and 41% are unfavorable. Among seniors, 41% are favorable toward her and 42% are unfavorable. Among Hispanic men, 35% are favorable toward her and 40% are unfavorable.

Cindy McCain is less of a known quantity. Voters have heard of the wife of the Arizona Senator, but they are a lot less likely to have an established opinion of her. Perhaps this will change after the Republican convention in early September.

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Forty-five percent (45%) of the voters are favorable toward Cindy McCain and only 15% are unfavorable. Although that leaves a large portion of the electorate still to make up their minds, there are three voters with something positive to say about Cindy McCain for every one with something negative to say. That is an excellent ratio and twice as positive as Michelle Obama.

Image Comparison Table

	<u>Aware</u>	<u>Favorable</u>	<u>Unfavorable</u>	<u>Ratio</u>
	%	%	%	
John McCain	100	57	36	1.6:1
Barack Obama	100	57	39	1.5:1
Cindy McCain	91	46	15	3.1:1
Michelle Obama	99	48	33	1.5:1

In preparation for tracking this election through the fall months, this survey included an unaided ballot question in which the names of the candidates were not read. The point spread in the unaided ballot matches the point spread in the aided ballot. From a statistical perspective, the election is tied on both the unaided and aided ballots.

Unaided ballots are a good indication of the level of commitment behind the candidate. To some extent, we can expect that the 40% who are giving us McCain's name without assistance and the 39% who are giving us Obama's name without assistance are locked into their vote decision. All of this suggests that only about 22% of the vote is really in flux even before we get to Labor Day. This may be a reflection of the early start of this presidential cycle.

One of the characteristics of the unaided ballot is that Barack Obama has a firm hold on young voters, but John McCain has a firm hold on older voters. Also, while African Americans are locked into Obama as a candidate, this is less likely to be the case for Hispanics. Contrary to what is going on with the Congressional campaigns, Republican intensity is slightly higher for McCain than Democrat intensity for Obama. We can certainly say that a lot of white conservative Christians seem locked into supporting McCain.

The aided ballot, asked much later in the survey, reveals a similar picture. Once again, McCain is ahead by a single point – tied for all practical purposes. John McCain is showing 47% on the ballot and Barack Obama is showing 46%. Last May, Obama was

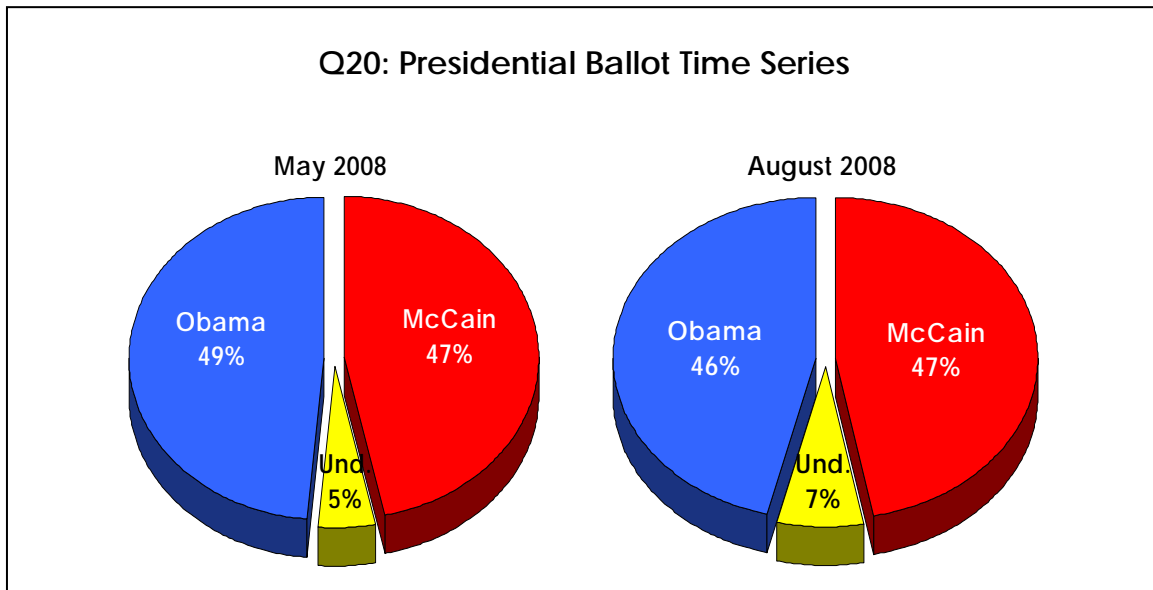
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capturing 49% and McCain was capturing 47%. So, it is not that McCain has increased his share of the vote, but rather that Barack Obama has lost a portion of his coalition.

This 3 point drop on the ballot for Obama has been more likely to come from Male Independents (-25), 45+ Independents (-17), Independents (-16), Baptist (-13), African American men (-13), single (-13), Midwest residents (-12), Central Plains residents (-12), 60-69 year olds (-11), married men (-10), active in church (-10), Protestant (-10), 30-39 year olds (-10), very conservative (-10), employed men (-9), Catholic (-9), white Evangelical (-9), union household (-9) and 18-34 year olds (-8).

Turnout modeling looks at key demographics and self-reported commitment in the election to forecast the outcome on Election Day. Turnout modeling puts McCain ahead on the ballot with 51% to 49%. But we know that young people are likely to account for 16% of total turnout based upon previous presidential year election results.¹ Indeed, younger voters seem quite energized based upon this survey (and other research available). If we make an adjustment to 16% of total participation among those under 30 years of age, then the ballot switches to 45% McCain and 48% Obama.

Again, the presidential race is simply too close to call. However, the trend seems to be a positive one for the McCain campaign.



¹ Franklin, Charles. "Age, Turnout and Votes," (Political Arithmetik, August 11, 2008), <http://politicalarithmetik.blogspot.com/2008/08/age-turnout-and-votes.html>, (Accessed August 18, 2008).

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The history of pollsters predicting the outcome of statewide campaigns when African American candidates are on the ballot has had some notable failures. For some reason, voters seem less likely to admit to someone calling them on the phone when they are not planning to vote for an African American candidate. Perhaps it is their own feelings of guilt when they have no other reason to do so. Because of all this, an attempt was made to quantify if a certain percentage of the Obama vote might be lying to the pollsters.

In the days ahead, we will continue to ask respondents how comfortable their “friends and neighbors would be voting for a Presidential candidate who is an African American.” The theory here is that the phrase “friends and neighbors” allows the respondent to tell the person on the phone how they really feel. The result is that 7% report that they are “not at all comfortable.”

If we just adjust the finding so that the portion of the vote that is supporting Obama but say that their friends and neighbors are “not at all comfortable” are removed from the Democratic nominee’s coalition, then we have to adjust the ballot down from the originally reported support level. Such an adjustment would push the ballot to 49% for McCain and 44% for Obama. In other words, this adjustment has about a 2 point impact on the support levels for the candidates. It is interesting to note that this is about the same impact level (although in the opposite direction) as the impact of a higher participation by young people.

Based upon experimentation in previous elections, it is probably a better estimate to ask voters about the opinions of their “friends and neighbors” rather than themselves directly. Despite that point, we asked respondents about a series of characteristics directly, including if they would be less likely to support an African American candidate. In this case, only 4% of respondents admitted that they themselves were “not at all comfortable” with an African American candidate (about half of the “friends and neighbors” response).

The age of John McCain seems to be a lot more of a factor based upon these self reported responses. But it would be a stretch to suggest that age discrimination has reached the same level as race discrimination in American politics. Besides, it seems likely that voters know McCain’s age already. It seems even more unlikely that respondents would be reluctant to tell an interviewer that they are not supporting McCain because of his age. While 27% of the electorate say they are “not at all comfortable” with a candidate who is 72 years old, only 4% of John McCain’s vote feels that way (or less than 2% of the electorate).

Another question that we plan to track through the election cycle is which of the candidates voters themselves think will win the election. This touch on expectations is much more reflective of the rhetoric coming out of the Obama campaign and the world of journalism. On this question, 51% of the voters think that Obama will win and only 34% believe that John McCain will be the victor. In many ways, the disparity between this question and the ballot is the most fascinating result of the survey.

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Twenty-two percent (22%) of those supporting John McCain for President on the ballot, think that Barack Obama will win in November. Only 9% of the Obama vote feels that McCain will win. To some extent, the Obama campaign needs to be careful about complacency. They have already been called out for being a bit smug – particularly when you consider their position on the ballot.

While Obama had the advantage on how the voters were reacting to what they were seeing, reading and hearing three months ago, that advantage has disappeared today. Both campaigns are within a point of each other in terms of the reaction by voters to what they are seeing, reading and hearing about each. Unfortunately for both, this contact is already having a net negative impact. For John McCain, 46% are less likely to vote for him and 43% are more likely to vote for him. For Barack Obama, 46% are less likely to vote for him and 42% are more likely to vote for him based upon what they are seeing.

Most of us understand that the earned media has been much more likely to be about Barack Obama over these summer months, but the impact of that coverage does not appear to be putting the McCain campaign at a disadvantage. Nothing could spell this out more clearly than a review of how each of the candidates is doing on the issues.

But one area where McCain is being labeled is about negative campaigning. We will probably continue to track, through the fall months, which one of the candidates is seen as running a more negative campaign. For now, it is clear that John McCain is being labeled as running the more negative campaign. Fifty percent (50%) of the voters feel that McCain is running the more negative campaign and 21% think Barack Obama is doing so. Of course, this question forces the respondent to make a choice between the two candidates (so it presumes that someone is doing so).

An examination of the 13 characteristics presented to respondents reveals that John McCain has improved his position over the last six months in all but one of them. That one area which has not improved for McCain is the one he most soundly “owns” – handling of the Iraq war. More importantly, McCain now leads in six of the thirteen characteristics provided to respondents, which asks if McCain or Obama would do a better job handling that particular issue or better illustrate that characteristic.

The strongest positive movements for McCain go a long way to explain his improvement on the ballot compared to three months ago. McCain’s issue handling gains were strongest on reducing gas and energy prices (+12), creating jobs and improving the economy (+12) and handling the health care issue (+18). He also saw big improvements for fighting for people like me (+11), being a strong leader (+10) and representing middle class values (+9).

But the strongest impact on the race may have been his improvement on sharing your values (+6), getting things done (+6), and keeping America prosperous (+6). In fact, it is this last characteristic of “keeping America prosperous” which is a strong predictor of

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which candidate will win. On this question, the two major candidates are now at parity – a direct reflection of the ballot today.

Attributes of the Candidates: A Time Series

<u>Attribute</u>	John McCain		Barack Obama		Net
	<u>May</u>	<u>Aug.</u>	<u>May</u>	<u>Aug.</u>	<u>Diff.</u>
	%	%	%	%	
War in Iraq	55	54	38	41	-4
Strong leader	48	52	43	37	10
Shares your values	43	46	46	43	6
Says what he believes	--	44	--	42	--
Keep America prosperous	41	43	47	43	6
Will get things done	40	42	48	44	6
Reduce gas & energy prices	31	40	50	37	12
Jobs (& economy)	33	39	54	48	12
Fights for people like me	33	39	53	48	11
Independent voice	--	37	--	50	
Representing middle class values	34	37	58	52	9
Will unite the country	34	36	53	50	5
Health care	24	35	61	54	18

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LOOKING AHEAD

August is too often unfairly criticized as a month when nothing happens in Washington. While it is true many Washington area residents use the Congressional district work period to spend some much needed time away from the area, August has often been a month for extraordinary political events. In past Augusts in Washington, there have been revelations that the President had been attacked by a rabbit, a sitting President was compelled to testify before a grand jury about his extramarital relationships, and a member of the United States Senate was arrested for his behavior in an airport restroom². And, just a few days ago, there were startling revelations about the personal life of a former Vice Presidential candidate.

These extraordinary August events also reveal another interesting August phenomenon – in the electoral world, August is much farther from November than one can imagine. Michael Dukakis, George H.W. Bush, and John Kerry have taken polling leads into August only to see a much different outcome when the first Tuesday following the first Monday in November arrived.

These historical events should give analysts pause as they reach for sweeping conclusions based on August polling data. That said, neither of these two candidates can claim much of a lead at this point in time, no matter how you look at the numbers. We have to remember that neither of these candidates have yet accepted their respective party's nominations.

But what we can say is that despite what has been a difficult time period in our nation's history both abroad and at home, the myth of Barack Obama's impending ascendancy to the highest office in the land is exactly that – a myth. Based upon the latest Battleground survey, we can say that John McCain has spent the last three months appealing to voters across a broad range of issues and characteristics. That effort at retail politics has already paid dividends. We can hope that it will continue to do so as Republicans head to their convention in a few short weeks.

One of the reasons that McCain is doing so well is that voters in the primary selected him in part because he was a change from what Republicans had put up for the White House in the past. McCain has always been a maverick, which by definition means he has spent most of his political career fighting against the traditional base of his party and trying to make a change. It is no fluke that the election laws we all live by today bear his name and reflect his hopes for a better tomorrow.

McCain has always represented change. To think that John McCain is not a change from the Bush Administration is to not understand the man – either man for that matter. But John McCain's view of change is a different sort of change than that defined by Barack

² Mortman, Howard. "Summer in DC: Scandal, not sandals," (*Politico*, July 21, 2008), <http://www.politico.com/news/stories/0708/11920.html>, (Accessed August 18, 2008).

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Obama. For one thing, it will be a change agenda informed by years of experience – which may seem counter-intuitive, but is not for this candidate.

No matter which candidate wins in November, the American electorate will be elevating a standing United States Senator directly to the Presidency for the first time since 1960. That is certainly a change, given that most of our recent Presidents have been former Governors. But the 1960 election turned out to be an important pivotal moment in our nation's history that allowed us to set a new course for our nation. In that, the 2008 election seems likely to have a strong resemblance.

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