

Public Opinion Watch
June 9-15, 2003

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1. Is the WMD Issue Starting to Bite?

Public Opinion Strategies/Greenberg Quinlan Rosner poll of 723 likely voters for NPR, released June 10, 2003 (conducted May 27-29, 2003)

Gallup poll of 1,029 adults for CNN/USA Today, released June 12, 2003 (conducted June 9-10, 2003)

CBS News poll of 841 adults, released June 15, 2003 (conducted June 12-13, 2003)

It's too early to say that the issue of the missing WMDs will hurt Bush politically. But recent polls are turning up good evidence that the public is starting to entertain real doubts about whether the Iraq war was truly worth the investment of blood and money we had to make. These are exactly the kind of doubts that could be inflamed by the continued failure to find WMDs and revelations about prewar distortions and deceptions. If that happens, the Bush administration could, in the end, suffer a serious diminution in its most important political advantage: the trust of the public on the national security issue.

Consider this finding from the recently released NPR poll. Likely voters were asked whether: (1) the Iraq war was a success and was worth the cost in lives and dollars; (2) the Iraq war was a success but was not worth the cost; or (3) the Iraq war was not a success. The replies were split down the middle between boosters and doubters of the Iraq war. Forty-eight percent said that the Iraq war was a success and worth the cost, while 48 percent said either that the war was a success, but not worth the cost (33 percent), or that the war was not a success (15 percent).

Moreover, if you look at swing-voting independents, doubts about the worthwhileness of the Iraq war are even stronger: 43 percent of this group said that the Iraq war was a success and worth the cost, compared to 55 percent who said either that its success was not worth the cost or that it was not a success. The data also show a wide gender gap on this issue. While 57 percent of men said that the Iraq war was a success and worth the cost, just 40 percent of women felt this way (55 percent of women thought either that the war's success wasn't worth the cost or that the war wasn't a success).

The CBS News poll has other findings consistent with these doubts. While 53 percent of adults in this poll say that Iraq was a threat that required immediate action, 45 percent now say that Iraq either was a threat that could have been contained (35 percent) or was not a threat at all (10 percent). The poll also finds that locating the WMDs does matter to most Americans (58 percent) and that the belief that the administration overestimated the number of WMDs in Iraq is growing (now 44 percent, up five points from two weeks ago).

The Gallup poll confirms that Americans are becoming more skeptical about Iraqi WMDs. Currently, 44 percent say that they are certain Iraq had facilities to create WMDs before the war, down eleven points from what the public believed before the war. Similarly, 43

percent say that they are certain Iraq had biological or chemical weapons before the war, down thirteen points from prewar views, and 37 percent are certain that Iraq was trying to develop nuclear weapons before the war, down eleven points from prewar beliefs.

We shall see how all this plays out in the weeks ahead. If doubts about Iraq's WMDs push the public more and more in the direction that the Iraq venture was not really worth the costs (which of course continue to mount), it indeed does mean trouble for the Bush administration. Especially if (and it's a big if) Democrats really start pressing the Bush administration on its now-well-documented prevarications on the extent of Iraq's WMDs. Stay tuned.

2. Return of the Gender Gap (If, Indeed, It Ever Went Away)

Zogby poll of 1,012 likely voters, released June 11, 2003 (conducted June 6-10, 2003)

This week brings new polls showing the return of the gender gap to American politics (if indeed it ever went away-see the November 25-29, 2002 Public Opinion Watch). In addition to the yawning gender gap on whether the Iraq war was really worthwhile (see above), the latest Zogby poll shows a substantial gender gap that really should scare Bush and his operatives. In this poll, Bush's typically weak reelection number in a generic Presidential ballot is 44 percent to 37 percent for an unnamed Democratic opponent. But break it down by gender and you get 49 percent to 33 percent for men and 40 percent to 40 percent for women. Even more amazing, in a closely related question, 56 percent of men say Bush deserves reelection, compared to 32 percent who say it is time for someone new. But women, by 44 percent to 43 percent, are more inclined to say it is time for someone new than to say that Bush deserves to be reelected.

Wow. And this is seventeen months before the election. By the time the election actually gets here, women should, as usual, be strongly pro-Democratic.

3. Are Seniors Moving Republican?

Sheryl Gay Stolberg, "Baby Boomers Transform an Old Bloc," New York Times, June 15, 2003

The New York Times seems to be making rather a speciality out of hyping thinly researched political trends in its pages. The latest example was in last Sunday's "Week in Review" section, where Sheryl Gay Stolberg enlightened us on how Baby Boomers were moving seniors toward the Republican party.

Oh, really? And what is the evidence for this trend? Well, the Boomers are getting older and lately there have been some elections where seniors have voted Republican. But, of course, there always have been some elections where seniors have voted Republican; they are not immune to overall political trends and tend to swing in the direction the country is moving. For example, seniors voted heavily for Reagan in 1980 and 1984-even more so than the country as a whole.

Oh, but the percentage of those aged sixty and over voting Republican for president went up from 44 percent in 1996 to 47 percent in 2000, Stolberg avers. But the Republican share of the presidential vote among all voters went up seven points, so such a change is hardly impressive. Moreover, the Democrats carried seniors by an identical margin (four points) in both elections. Some trend.

Well, what about the fact that seniors voted Republican for the House in three successive elections (1994, 1996, 1998)? But, as Stolberg herself notes, in the most recent election for which we have data (2000), seniors swung back toward the Democrats, favoring them by four points, while the country was about evenly split!

This "trend" is looking shakier and shakier. Then, add in the fact that the youngest seniors-those aged sixty to sixty-four, and therefore closest in age to the Boomers-actually were the most pro-Democratic group of seniors in that election and one is forced to conclude that there just isn't a lot of there there (to paraphrase Gertrude Stein).

Public Opinion Watch awaits (with gritted teeth) the next trend from the crack social researchers at the New York Times.

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