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To: Friends of Democracy Corps

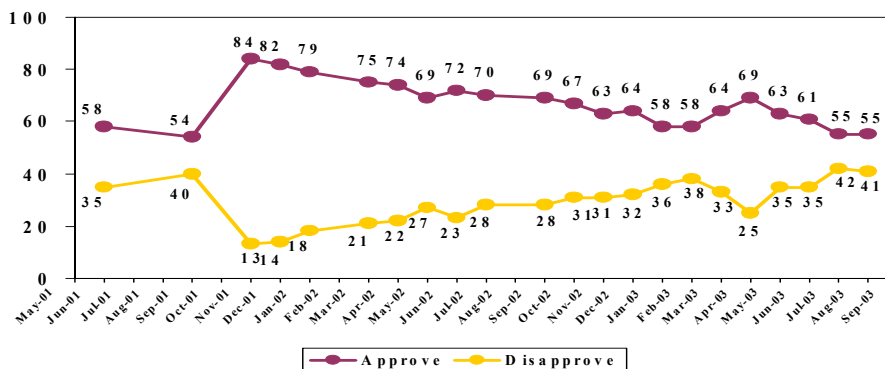
From: Stan Greenberg
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RE: BUSH'S FALL
The New Political Terrain

As Congress returns to its Fall session and the presidential election year approaches, George W. Bush's political standing has dropped to the lowest point since 9/11, and on some key measures, the lowest of his entire presidency. The new Democracy Corps poll finds that the three forces we highlighted in our last memo as driving Bush's support down – anxiety over the economy, concern about Iraq, and doubts about Bush's trustworthiness – continue to erode his standing through the end of the summer, creating a very different political terrain from 2002 and the first part of 2003, and the biggest moment of opportunity Democrats have had since 2000.¹

Just four months after the war in Iraq pushed Bush's job approval ratings into the high 60s, the figures are now back to pre-9/11 levels. At this point, only 55 percent approve of his job as president, just a single point above the lowest mark of his presidency.

Bush Job Approval



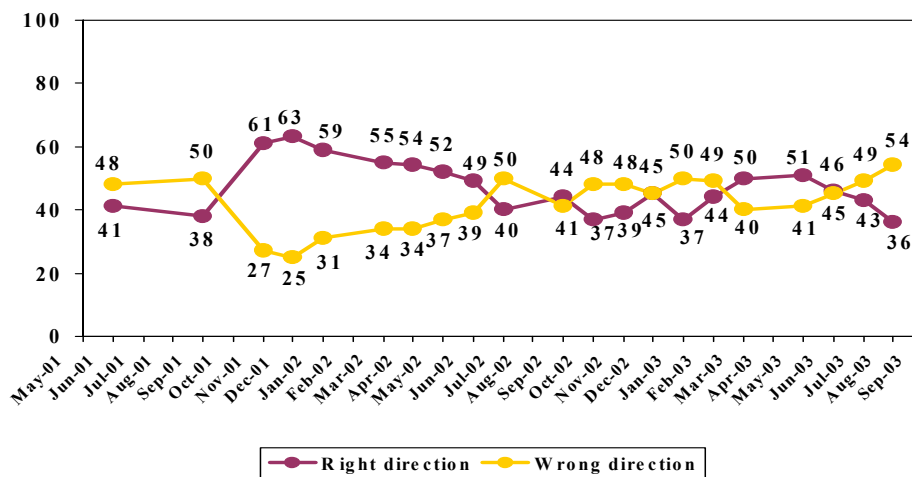
* Since Democracy Corps did not conduct a poll during April, the April data is an average of public polls conducted during that month

¹Democracy Corps conducted a national poll of 1,004 likely voters August 24-28, 2003.

While the overall figure of 55 percent is stable from July, the underlying picture shows further deterioration. In particular, there is an important and continuing erosion in the intensity of support for Bush, with the share expressing strong job approval dropping 3 points just since July. Just after 9/11, the share who strongly approved of his performance as president was nearly 10 times as large as the share who strongly disapproved (58 percent compared to 6 percent). Throughout the Spring this year – just before, during, and just after the war in Iraq – the ratio hovered around 2:1 (for example, 42 percent strongly approved of Bush's job performance in mid-May, compared to 23 percent who strongly disapproved). Now, however, the figures are nearing parity – 34 to 30 percent.

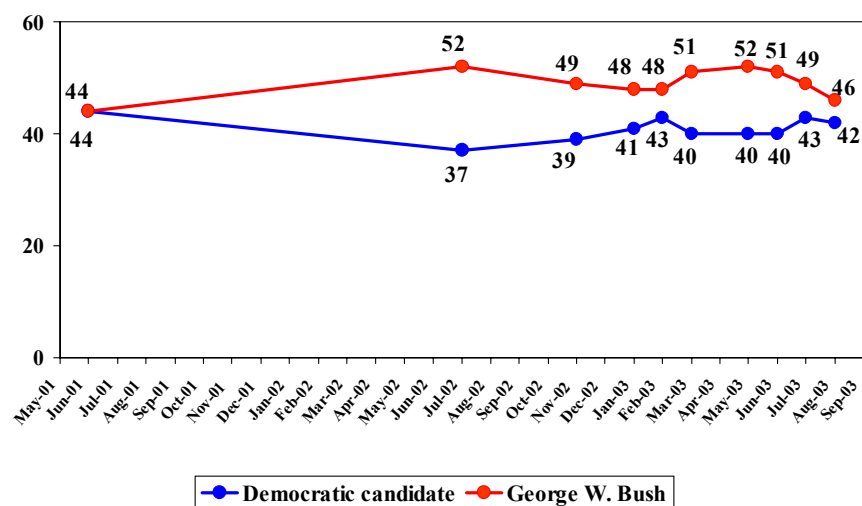
Even more significant, more voters now see the country headed in the wrong direction – a solid 54 percent majority, up 5 points from July – higher than at any other time during Bush's presidency. Only 36 percent think things are going right – an 18-point net negative assessment about George W. Bush's stewardship of the country. This is not just a partisan phenomenon; the sense that the country is off course has gone up more sharply over the past two months among Independents than among Democrats, with 59 percent of Independents now feeling this way – a jump of 10 points just since late June.

Country Direction



The result is a political environment in which a clear majority of Americans would now not vote to re-elect Bush. In a match-up against an unnamed Democratic opponent, Bush falls to 46 percent, his lowest mark yet since 9/11 and below his performance in 2000. The drop in his head-to-head performance is even greater among white men, the core of his support, and is particularly strong with younger voters.

Presidential Vote

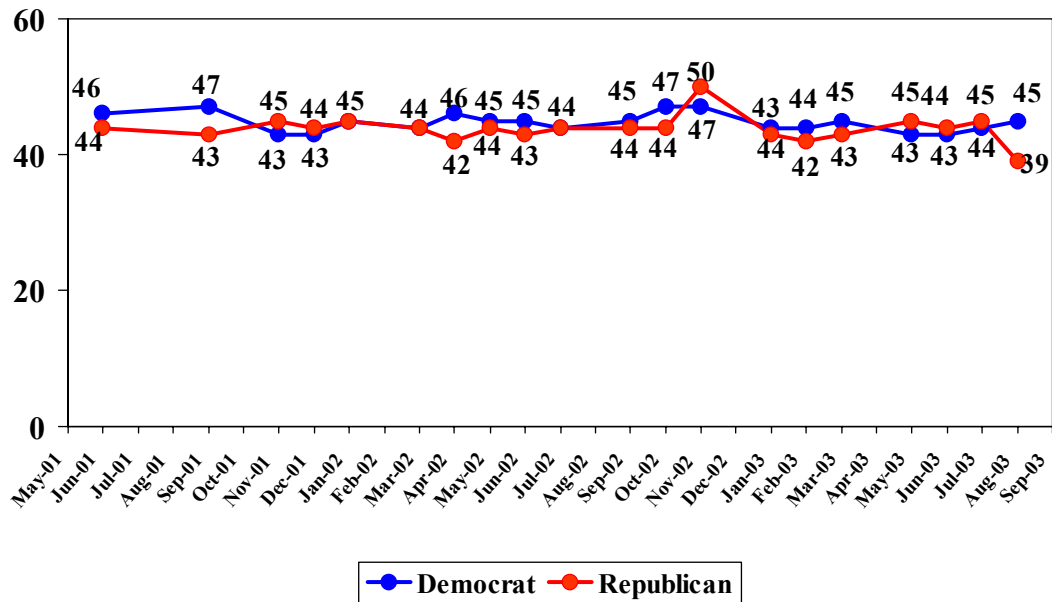


Three forces, above all, continue to drive up worries about the country and drive down Bush's support. Above all, voters are worried about the economy, with 55 percent wanting to go in a "significantly different direction" from the one Bush is heading. For the first time during the Bush presidency, a 2:1 ratio of Independent voters now say Democrats would do a better job on the economy than Republicans (47-22 percent, compared to 40-30 percent in mid-June, when we last asked this question).

Voters are also worried about the American occupation of Iraq, with fully 50 percent feeling that Bush lacks a plan to win the peace. And, in the wake of the controversy about Bush's claims about weapons of mass destruction in Iraq, the electorate's trust in him remains weakened, with the share who say he "was honest about the dangers and threats Iraq posed before the war" moving down another 5 points since July, to just 50 percent.

The public's growing uneasiness about Bush carries over to his Party as a whole, with Republicans slipping to a 45-39 percent deficit in a generic congressional ballot test – a 6-point swing in the margin since just July, and the weakest level of support for Republicans since well before the Bush presidency.

Generic Congressional Ballot



All these trends point to major political vulnerabilities for Bush, as voters start to hold him accountable for a weak economy and a troubled reconstruction effort in Iraq. More than at any time during the Bush presidency, voters are looking for an alternative, providing Democrats with a major opportunity to not only offer their critique of Bush, but also to get heard on their own plans. Tomorrow, we offer a memo highlighting specific opportunities for Democrats on national security, drawing on other results from the current poll, and we will offer further thoughts on Democratic policy and message opportunities after another nation-wide poll later this month.