

# THE Cook Political Report

AND



National  
Omnibus  
Poll



RT Strategies

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## **This Month's Cook Political Report/RT Strategies Poll**

- Presidential Job Approval
- Right Direction/Wrong Track
- 2006 Generic Congressional Ballot Test
- 2008 Generic Presidential Ballot Test
- 2008 Democratic Nomination: What do Democrats want?
- 2008 Democratic Presidential Nomination Trial Heat
- 2008 Republican Nomination: What do Republicans want?
- 2008 Republican Nomination Trial Heat

A just-completed Cook Political Report/RT Strategies national poll confirms that President Bush's job approval plunge that began earlier this year has bottomed out and he has regained at least some lost ground. The survey of 1,000 adults conducted December 8-11 (margin of error +/- 3.1 percent) shows that 42 percent approved the overall job George W. Bush is doing as President, up a point from three weeks ago, with 55 percent disapproving.

The President's approval rating among Republicans was 88 percent (11 percent disapproved), among Democrats it was 12 percent (85 percent disapproved), while among independents 31 percent approved (67 percent disapproved). Generally speaking, as long as the President's approval rating among Republicans is above 80 percent, his approval rating among all is probably above 40 percent. However, when his own partisans drop below that point, as they did during much of November, he drops below 40 percent over all. The difference between 39 and 40 percent, while just a single percentage point, is huge politically and psychologically, as while 40 percent is nearly toxic, 39 percent is radioactive.

The obvious question is whether we've seen the rebound or if this is the beginning of a more meaningful and durable recovery of the President's numbers. Lance

Tarrance, the Republican partner in RT Strategies, argues that “Bush has climbed back above the 40% line, but don’t look for a whole lot more in terms of gains,” and the fact that much of the reclaimed ground was among Republicans coming home, and there aren’t too many more to be reclaimed, suggests that he might be right. Thom Riehle, the Democratic partner concurs, saying, “Bush has recovered his standing with his base supporters, but has a long way to go before extending his appeal beyond that Republican base, because moderates and political Independents remain intensely opposed at this time.”

Until the President starts gaining ground among independents, it’s hard to see him getting back into the high forties again.

### **Context**

From October 28 through November 15, 12 major national media polls were conducted, with 11 out of the 12 putting the President’s approval rating between 35 and 39 percent, one had 41 percent. Since November 16, there have been eight, with seven out of the eight indicating a job approval rating of between 40 and 43 percent, a very clear shift.

While 43 percent, in a Gallup Poll released today as well, is certainly a bad job rating for a President, it matches the worst approval rating that President Reagan had during his second term in Gallup polling, which was at the height of the Iran Contra scandal. When the President’s approval ratings were in the mid-to-high thirties, as they were for half of last month, they were the worst of any elected and re-elected second term president other than Richard Nixon in Gallup polling, lower than Dwight Eisenhower (48 percent) or Bill Clinton (54 percent) saw in their worst points in their second term. Whether the President can remain on the sunny side of 40 remains to be seen, interestingly his “strongly disapprove” did not move a single point from the last Cook Political Report/RT Strategies poll to this.

### **National Direction**

The survey showed 36 percent of Americans believe the country is headed in the right direction, 61 percent saying wrong track, a bit higher than most other recent polls that have shown right direction in more the 31-34 percent range.

### **Generic Congressional Ballot Test**

Democrats had an eleven point advantage on the generic congressional ballot test, 49 to 38 percent. This is interesting as the overall sample revealed just a three-point Democratic edge on party identification. Ninety percent of Republicans said they would support a Republican candidate for Congress, 91 percent of Democrats said that they would support a Democrat, the difference was that among the third of the sample that identified themselves as independents, Democrats had a 20-point advantage, 48 to 28 percent.

## **2008 Presidential Race**

The poll also looked at a generic presidential ballot test, which found Democrats up 45 to 32 percent, with 86 percent of Democrats and 81 percent of Republicans favoring their own parties' unnamed presidential candidate, independents split for Democrats, 44 to 21 percent.

Much of the new Cook Political Report/RT Strategies Poll however was devoted to the 2008 presidential nomination contests for the two major parties. An effort was made not just to measure current preferences for the two parties' nominations but also to take a look at what kind of nominee they desired, what direction they wanted to go with a nominee, what was the prototype each party wanted in a candidate.

Democratic voters and those independents who lean toward the Democratic Party were asked the following question: "In thinking about a Democratic nominee for President in 2008, which ONE of the following three descriptions comes closest to the kind of candidate you would prefer as the Democratic nominee for President:

- (A) A candidate who advocates all of the values and traditions of the Democratic Party and stands up for liberal positions;
- (B) A candidate who reflects most of the values and traditions of the Democratic Party but is somewhat less liberal and therefore might be more electable than some past party nominees;
- (C) A candidate who is much more moderate than recent Democratic Party nominees, someone who is not from the Northeast, but who will aggressively reach out to independent and Republican voters in areas like the South and the Midwest.

Among the 460 voters who said that they were Democrats or independents who leaned toward the Democratic Party, 29 percent chose the first "Democratic Classic" type candidate, reflecting the traditional Democratic liberalism, 31 percent chose the second, moderately-liberal candidate and 31 percent chose the last, full-fledged moderate (the alternatives were actually given to respondents in random order).

For the Democratic nomination, Sen. Hillary Rodham Clinton (NY) was the clear favorite of Democrats and Democratic-leaners with 33 percent of the vote, followed by Sen. John Kerry (MA), in second place with 17 percent, former Senator John Edwards (NC) was third with 15 percent and fourth was Sen. Joe Biden (DE) with seven percent. There was a three-way tie for fifth place between Sen. Russ Feingold (WI) and Govs. Bill Richardson (NM) and Mark Warner (VA). Tied for eighth place were Sens. Evan Bayh (IN) and retired Army Gen. Wesley Clark (AR), another 2004 contender, at three percent each.

The strength of Clinton's position is that she garnered as much support (33%) as the next two candidates combined; Kerry and Edwards had a combined 32 percent. To test the upward potential for the two, if those who chose Clinton initially were asked their second choice, Kerry gains 11 points, moving to 28 percent, but Edwards picks up eight points, to 23 percent, with the rest scattered among the remaining candidates.

Riehle argues among Democrats and independents who lean Democratic, "Clinton has some real demographic core support groups (urban Democrats, non-whites, women), but at the same time she is not defined by ideology—she does as well with non-liberals (32%) as she does with liberals (34%) and the same with strong pro-choice supporters (32%) as among non-strong-pro-choice supporters (34%). She cuts across all the ideological divisions among Democrats and Independents who lean Democratic."

A total of 380 Republican voters as well as those independents who lean toward the GOP were asked then asked, "In thinking about a Republican nominee for President in 2008, which ONE of the following descriptions comes closest to the kind of candidate you would prefer as the Republican nominee for President:

- (A) A candidate who is a strong conservative, who emphasizes social cultural issues, and is pro-life and opposes gay marriage;
- (B) A candidate who is a strong conservative focusing on business and tax issues, and who favors conservative positions on social and cultural issues, but does not emphasize them;
- (C) A candidate who focuses on a strong national defense and projecting American influence around the world, and who favors conservative positions on social and cultural issues, but does not emphasize them.

Given these three prototypes of candidates, 33 percent preferred a social and culturally-emphasizing candidate, 30 percent preferred a conservative who focuses on business and tax issues, more of a garden variety, Main Street Conservative, while 29 percent picked the description that reflected more neo-conservative values.

For the Republican nod, among Republicans and GOP-leaning independents, Sen. John McCain (AZ) and former New York City Mayor Rudy Giuliani were tied for first place with 25 percent and former House Speaker Newt Gingrich (GA) had 12 percent. In fourth place was Senate Majority Leader Bill Frist (TN) with five percent, with Gov. Mitt Romney (MA) and Rick Santorum (PA) next, both with four percent. Running seventh were both Sen. George Allen (VA) and Gov. George Pataki (NY), with a three-way tie for eighth place between Sen. Chuck Hagel (NE), Gov. Mike Huckabee (AR) and Gov. Mark Sanford (SC). Bringing up the rear were Sen. Sam Brownback (KS) with one percent, 14 percent were undecided.

Many observers, including this one, believe that it is a virtual impossibility for a candidate who is pro-choice on the abortion issue and takes liberal positions on gun control and gay rights as well to capture the nomination, and as a result, my hunch is that Giuliani is unlikely to enter the fray. With Giuliani out, the order of finish was: McCain with 30 percent, Gingrich with 16 percent, Frist with seven percent, six percent for Pataki, Allen, Romney and Santorum five percent each, Hagel, Huckabee and Sanford two percent, Brownback one percent and Pawlenty less than one percent.

Tarrance argues that “three years out from the 2008 Presidential election, the GOP has 4 big deficits to overcome: Bush job approval is minus 13 (55% disapprove-42% approve); the generic House 2006 ballot vote is minus 11 (49% Dem-38% Rep); the generic Presidential 2008 ballot is minus 13 (45% Dem-32% Rep), and overall, party ID, with leaners, is minus 8 (46% Dem-38% Rep).

The full Cook Political Report/RT Strategies poll questionnaire with top line results and the full cross tabs of the survey are included and also will be available on our website: [www.cookpolitical.com](http://www.cookpolitical.com)

### **About The Cook Political Report**

Founded in 1984, *The Cook Political Report* provides independent, non-partisan analysis of U.S. Senate, House, gubernatorial and presidential elections and political trends. With a Washington, D.C.-based staff of five, *The Cook Political Report* offers its subscribers detailed analyses of all U.S. Senate and gubernatorial races and of every competitive and open House seat in the country. *The Cook Political Report* staff rates each Senate, gubernatorial and House race on a seven-point scale based on its level of competitiveness. *The Cook Political Report* can be found at [www.cookpolitical.com](http://www.cookpolitical.com).

### **About RT Strategies**

RT Strategies, a bipartisan polling and strategic consulting firm was founded in 2005 by veteran pollsters Thomas Riehle, a Democrat, and Lance Tarrance, a Republican. The firm will produce a weekly national omnibus poll with varying participation by outside groups, including political party organizations and lobbying firms. Riehle was recently head of Ipsos Public Affairs, where he began the Ipsos/Associated Press poll. Prior to working for Ipsos, Riehle worked at Peter D. Hart Research Associates. Tarrance founded the Houston-based polling firm Tarrance & Associates in 1977, which he ran until 1992. He was on the Board of Directors of the Gallup Organization, and later was president of Gallup China in Beijing.

### **For more information**

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