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NPR Wrap Up National Survey Will 2006 still be a Change Election?

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NPR's final 2005 national survey of American voters, conducted jointly by Stan Greenberg of Greenberg Quinlan Rosner and Glen Bolger of Public Opinion Strategies, shows an electorate responding to recent developments on the economy and Iraq, but still poised to produce a change election in 2006.¹ This interpretive memo is solely the product of Greenberg Quinlan Rosner and does not reflect the views of Public Opinion Strategies or of National Public Radio.

This memo starts with the question: "Will 2006 still be a change election?" With 2005 coming to a close – with gas prices falling, the votes now counted in Iraq's first parliamentary election, and with President Bush finishing the year with an unprecedented two-week campaign to present his future plans and defend his security policies – it is important to see whether the structure of the change election has been shaken or damaged.

Clearly, the president has achieved an improvement in his job approval. The NPR survey shows him with 44 percent approval, which is just one point above the average of the public polls conducted over the last two weeks. This represents a 5-point improvement from his average for November. Bush's improvement comes from an improvement in the economy. The NPR survey, for example, shows a 5-point increase in the number saying the economy is doing "excellent" or "good," now 47 percent. The public polls also show a modest improvement on his handling of Iraq, up about 4 points across all the public polls to 41 percent, on average. In the NPR survey, Bush is slightly favored over the Democratic Party (48 to 43 percent) to handle the Iraq issue.

Those gains are real but have not budged the structure underlying the 2006 election. They have not translated into improvements for the Republicans, particularly in the race for Congress. They have not altered judgments about whether the Iraq war was worth it or a mistake, and they have not given the Republicans standing on the economy or national priorities. Frankly, a good 60

¹ National Public Radio survey of 800 likely voters, conducted December 15, 17-18, 2005 by Public Opinion Strategies and Greenberg Quinlan Rosner Research. The survey has a margin of error of +/- 3.46%

percent of American voters at the close of 2005, according to the NPR poll, believe the country is headed in the wrong direction.

Let us review the various elements of the structure that leaves the electorate still very ready to vote for change.

1. Change.

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3. Intensity of support and base politics.

In this off-year election, Democratic voters and opponents of the President are much more intense in their feelings. For example, just 26 percent of the likely voters strongly approve of Bush's performance in office, dwarfed by the 42 percent who strongly disapprove. That is reflected in the fragmentation of Republican voters. For example, 11 percent of 2004 Bush voters are now intending to vote Democratic for Congress. That is nearly three times the level of defection evident for Kerry voters: only 4 percent intend to vote Republican.

4. Independents.

Swing voters are turning to the Democrats in very large numbers, according to the NPR poll. Independents vote Democratic by 17 points – double the margin for the electorate as a whole. It is hard to imagine how one overcomes that big a swing to the Democrats, particularly if Democrats are also doing better in the world of base politics.

5. National Issue Priorities.

The Democrats dominate almost every issue presented in this survey. By 17 points, voters think they will do a better job on handling the economy and jobs, reflecting the broad range of concerns, including health care costs, living standards, and jobs outsourcing, that have not been blurred by changes in gas prices. But Democrats are also ahead on which party voters trust on "government spending," suggesting the scope of the problem facing the Republicans on budget issues and national priorities. The Republicans are ahead only on "the war on terrorism," but only by 9 points – far short of the heady days when Republicans had a 23-point lead.²

² NBC News/Wall Street Journal survey of 1,002 adults, conducted January 10-12, 2004.

6. Iraq.

While the President has improved his position on handling Iraq, it is not at all clear that he has changed the judgments about the war or helped Republicans. In the NPR survey, Democrats are trusted over the Republicans by 8 points to handle the issue. By 54 to 43 percent, voters continue to believe the Iraq war was a “mistake.” When we engage in a full-throated debate on the issue – with the Democrats attacking Bush for lacking plans while laying out their own, and Republicans showing they have a plan for victory and accusing the Democrats of wanting to cut and run – sentiment is largely unchanged: 51 percent agree with the Democrats and 45 percent with the Republicans. Most troubling for the Republicans are the results for Independents. After hearing the debate, they side with the Democrats on Iraq by 23 points (58 to 35 percent).

The end of the year has brought a modest rise in confidence in the president, though 44 percent approval hardly creates a change in mood. A majority of 54 percent still disapproves of the president, and the structure for a change election seems largely intact. The desire for a new direction, the greater intensity and unity of Bush’s opponents, the swing of independent voters and the Iraq war all continue to move voters toward a change vote in 2006.

Not yet factored into the change equation is the issue of corruption. The indictments and investigations, stretching from both houses of Congress to the White House, from Washington to California, have hardly penetrated the public consciousness. For now, voters in the NPR survey see this as a problem of both parties, business as usual in Washington. When asked which party is more responsible for the corruption in Washington, 65 percent of voters say both parties are equally responsible. Democrats have only a 7-point advantage on “improving ethics in Washington, D.C.,” with 15 percent saying neither party. At the moment, presentation of information and Republican arguments that this is a bi-partisan / few-bad-apples problem does not push voters away from their current interpretation.

This should be an important warning flag to Democrats running for office around the country. For sure, people think there is a special-interest mess in Washington, which increases the mood for change as the indictments and trials begin to play out in larger numbers. But Democrats will not get heard unless they are reformers – differentiated from the special-interest cesspool in Washington and prepared to advocate real change.

The caution about both parties on ethics does not greatly change the structure supporting a change vote in 2006. Voters are looking for ways to vote for change and that desire will continue to shape our politics in 2006.