

AEI Political Report

Bush and His Predecessors

May 2005 marks the 53rd month that President Bush has occupied the Oval Office. This chart compares Bush's approval rating with those of his predecessors at this same point in their terms.

The 53rd-Month Mark

May 2005	George W. Bush	50%
May 1997	Bill Clinton	57
May 1985	Ronald Reagan	55
May 1973	Richard Nixon	45
Apr. 1968	Lyndon Johnson	50
May 1957	Dwight Eisenhower	62

Note: Data are the first asking of the question each month.
Source: The Gallup Organization.

Laura's Laurels

With the departure of Colin Powell from the administration, First Lady Laura Bush is the most popular figure around the president. According to Gallup, a stunning 80 percent view her favorably. Hillary Clinton, who played a much more active role in policy-making as First Lady, never had a favorable rating this high.

As for "Mr. Excitement," a term she used affectionately to describe her husband in a skit at a recent Washington dinner, just 59 percent view him favorably. In many polls, a majority of Democrats view the first lady favorably.

Q: As I read each name, please say if you have a favorable or unfavorable opinion of these people . . . ?

	Favorable	Unfavorable
Laura Bush	80%	12%
George W. Bush	59	39

Source: The Gallup Organization, February 4-6, 2005.



Congress's Course

The late April CBS News/*New York Times* and early May Gallup surveys showed Congress with a 35 percent approval rating. In Gallup's poll, this was the lowest approval rating for the institution in seven years. In both polls, partisan leanings colored people's feelings about Congress. In response to Gallup's question, 28 percent of Democrats, compared to 48 percent of Republicans, approved of the institution.

How serious are the low approval ratings for Congress? From 1992 through 1996, in twenty-five separate polls, Congress's rating never broke 40 percent. In the fall of 1994, before the Republicans stunned the nation by retaking control of the House of Representatives for the first time in forty years, around 20 percent approved of the job the institution was doing.

People generally view their representative more favorably than they view Congress as a whole.

Q: Do you approve or disapprove of the way Congress is handling its job?

Approve 35% Disapprove 51%

Q: How about the representative in Congress from your district? Do you approve or disapprove of the way your representative is handling his or her job?

Approve 57% Disapprove 23%

Source: CBS News/*New York Times*, April 13-16, 2005.

Lame Ducks, Sitting Ducks, and Dead Ducks

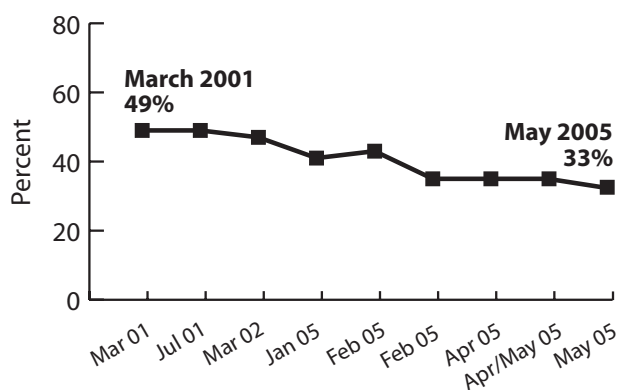
Is President Bush a lame duck? Is Tom DeLay a sitting duck? Fowl metaphors in American politics are popular. According to wordsmith William Safire, the term "lame duck" comes to us from eighteenth-century Britain, where it referred to a bankrupt businessman. By 1830, he tells us in his *Political Dictionary*, "the phrase was used to label politically bankrupt politicians." According to Safire, sitting ducks are "vulnerable," and dead ducks are "finished." Lame ducks are politically challenged.

Social Security Simmers

In his tour to promote Social Security modernization, President Bush visited sixty cities in sixty days. Members of his administration visited 127 cities and did more than 500 radio interviews. Still, there is little evidence in the new polls that the president's ideas are catching fire.

Gallup's polling, like that of others, shows the president's approval rating on handling the issue at a low point. Just 35 percent approve of the job he is doing handling Social Security.

Approval of George W. Bush's handling of Social Security



Source: The Gallup Organization.

The polling team of ABC News and the *Washington Post* shows support for the idea of personal accounts down to 45 percent. When the team first asked the question in 2000, 64 percent supported the accounts. The drop in support comes almost entirely from Democrats (down 28 points) and Independents (down 23 points). Among age groups, the decline has been uniform.

What explains the public's lack of enthusiasm? First, Americans are always wary of big changes. Poll questions about private accounts between 1995 and late 2004 asked about an abstract idea. People liked the sound of it, especially when the market was doing well, and most polls showed majority support. But when the hypothetical idea became real, people began to think more critically about a big change. Second, most nonretired Americans do not expect Social Security to be a major part of their retirement income. Most people over the age of thirty expect to get something from the system when they retire, but not what they think they are due. These feelings also dampen the mood for change. Third, the president ran into a wall of united Democratic opposition, and this pulled rank-and-file Democrats away from anything he supported.

While the president has not gained ground, neither have the Democrats. Americans are worried the president will go too far in changing the system and that the Democrats will not go far enough.

Q: How worried are you that the Republicans will go too far in changing the Social Security system . . . ?

Very worried	28%
Somewhat worried	34
Not too worried	21
Not at all worried	15

Q: How worried are you that the Democrats will not go far enough to change the Social Security system . . . ?

Very worried	22%
Somewhat worried	39
Not too worried	26
Not at all worried	11

Source: Gallup/CNN/USA Today, April 29–May 1, 2005.

Terror Update

Americans are skeptical that we can ever eliminate the threat of terrorism completely. They expect the battle to be a long and difficult one. Seventy-three percent in a newly released Martilla Communications poll for the Security and Peace Institute said that we have not yet accomplished our goals in Afghanistan because of the large al-Qaeda presence there, while 19 percent said we had completed our mission because al-Qaeda forces have been defeated and the Taliban is out of power.

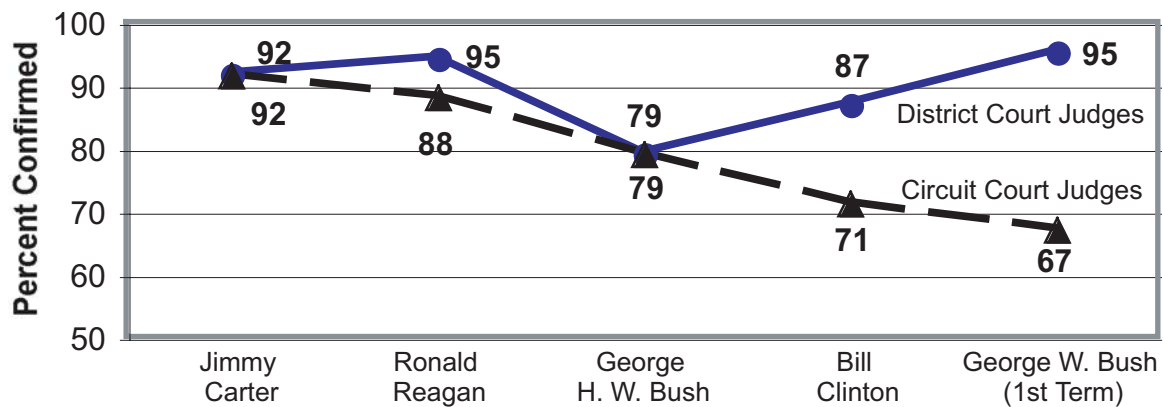
Americans give the Bush administration credit for its work thus far. Fifty-nine percent said the administration had been very or somewhat successful in dismantling bin Laden's network, while 40 percent said we had been somewhat or very unsuccessful in doing so.

Q: How much confidence do you have . . . ?

Great deal/fair amount of confidence in the Bush administration to protect America from future terrorist attacks	65%
Not very much/none at all	33

Source: Martilla Communications Group for the Security and Peace Institute, January 23–27, 2005.

Federal Court Confirmation Rate



Source: Congressional Research Service, "Judicial Nomination Statistics: US District and Circuit Courts, 1977–2004," February 23, 2004; personal communication with majority staff of Senate Judiciary Committee, May 8, 2005; American Enterprise Institute 2005.

With the argument over the confirmation of judges consuming many people in Washington these days, it is useful to step back to gain some historical perspective. The chart above illustrates how the fight over appellate court nomi-

nees has escalated in recent years. It shows that the confirmation rate for circuit court judges in President Bush's first term is the lowest in modern history. District court confirmation rates have not changed significantly over time.

Motherhood, Fatherhood, and Apple Pie

Mother's Day produced three substantial surveys on parenting. All three reported high levels of satisfaction among today's busy moms. Among the interesting findings:

- 71 percent of the moms in the Greenberg Quinlan Rosner study for Club Mom said having children made their marriage stronger. Only 2 percent said this made their marriage weaker.
- 88 percent of mothers agreed that their husband or partner fully recognizes and appreciates the job they do.
- 61 percent of mothers in the Institute for American Values study disagreed that the roles of mothers and fathers were interchangeable.
- 80 percent of men, 75 percent of women, and 72 percent of working mothers in the ABC News/Washington Post survey agreed with this statement: It may be necessary for mothers to be working because the family needs money, but it would be better if she could stay home and take care of the house and children.

Oui or Non? The French Vote on the EU Constitution

On May 29, French voters will go to the polls to vote on the European Union Constitution. Most polls taken during April showed the referendum going down. Support picked up in early May, only to fall again in mid-May. French President Jacques Chirac, whose popularity has been sagging, has pulled out all the stops in urging a "oui" vote, appealing to French pride by describing the constitution as a "daughter of 1789" and arguing that a "non" vote would "interrupt 50 years of European construction." A recent poll appears below.

Q: A referendum on the future of the European Constitution will be held in France on May 29, 2005. If this referendum were held next Sunday, would you vote yes to the constitutional project or no to the European constitutional project?

Yes	47%
No	53

Source: Ipsos/Le Figaro, May 20–21, 2005.

A Simple Look at Midterm Elections . . .

For many years, political scientists had a nearly iron-clad rule: The party out of power in the White House gained House seats in midterm elections. From the Civil War to 1994, only the 1934 election broke that rule. But our past two midterm elections have defied tradition, with Democrats picking up five seats in 1998 during Clinton's presidency and the Republicans gaining six seats in 2002 during Bush's presidency.

While it may be tempting to declare the old rule dead, it is more likely that our past two midterms were aberrations. Presidential elections tend to produce a surge of voters for the president's party, but midterms see a return to normal voting patterns. The 1998 and 2002 elections may be consistent with this insight because both of these off-year elections had extraordinary circumstances that motivated voters of the president's party (opposition to impeachment in 1998 and 9/11 in 2002) more than one would expect.

If the natural diminishment of voting for the president's party leads to a loss of seats, the magnitude of the loss is mostly explained by other factors—the number of seats the president's party holds (the more seats, the more likely that there will be losses), the performance of the economy, and the president's approval ratings. So watch how the economy and the president are performing a year from now.

Finally, one other factor will likely limit losses for the president's party in the House in 2006. Most congressional seats are safe. Most districts are drawn to be safe Republican or Democratic districts. Very few Republican-leaning seats are held by Democrats, and vice versa. Further, many seats are safe because incumbents often have advantages related to their name recognition, the fundraising opportunities they have, and support of their party.

In short, midterm elections still favor the party out of the presidency, but because of the large number of safe seats, the number of seats gained by Democrats may be small. But if the economy or the president's approval ratings drop dramatically, the gains could be more significant.



. . . And A Sporting Look at the 2032 Ones

Demographer William Frey, a visiting fellow at the Brookings Institution, has used his deep knowledge of Census data to peer into our electoral future. In a paper entitled "The Electoral College Moves to the Sunbelt," Frey reminds us that in the 1972 election, the Sunbelt (the South and the West) had a four-vote edge over the Snowbelt (the Northeast and Midwest) in the electoral college. By 2004, the Sunbelt's advantage was eighty-eight. In 2030, if the new projections hold up, the Sunbelt's advantage will rise to 146 votes. If the new population projections are on target, Texas and Florida will gain eight electoral college votes by 2030, while New York will lose six, and Pennsylvania and Ohio, four.

What do these projections mean for Red, Blue, and Purple America? Frey admits that such speculation is fraught with difficulty. There is no guarantee that future generations will have the political views of today's voters. America is a very mobile place. Will a substantial out-migration of Californians to Utah turn that solidly Red state Blue?

Frey's straight-line projection from the 2004 results shows Red trouncing Blue in 2030, 303 to 235. A more nuanced examination builds on the notion of Purple states where the margin between Bush and Kerry was less than 10 percent. The Snowbelt contains eleven such Purple states, including Illinois, Michigan, Ohio, and Pennsylvania. The Sunbelt has ten Purple states, including the big electoral prize of Florida. Viewed this way, in 2030, the solid Red states will have 194 electoral college votes, the solid Blue, 117, with "dual personality" Snow-and-Sunbelt Purple states holding the key to victory with 227 votes.

The safest bet, says Frey, is that "demographic changes ahead will present significant challenges for each major party."

The full report can be found at www.brookings.edu/metro/20050505_Frey.pdf.

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