

# The Minority Party Blues: The Present and Future of the Democratic Party

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## Abstract

This article looks at how the Democratic Party has fared as the minority party. The extent of their decline is severe and has been manifested in all three facets of the party: in government, in the electorate, and as an organization. The sources of this decline have been both beyond the Democratic Party's control (realignment) and within it (poor strategy on the part of party leaders). As a result, the Democratic Party in 2005 faced the arduous tasks of trying to influence public policy from a weak position while working to build a party organization capable of winning future elections. On the former task, Democrats in Congress had mixed success establishing their priorities on the major issues of the day: the War on Terrorism and the War in Iraq, judicial nominations, and the response to Hurricanes Katrina and Rita. On the latter task, the Democratic National Committee has worked to reenergize the party with new leadership and a new electoral strategy, but countervailing forces make it unlikely that the Democrats will shed their minority party status anytime soon.

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Following the 2004 elections, the Democratic Party was firmly ensconced as America's minority party. John Kerry's loss to George W. Bush meant that, by 2009, the Democratic Party will have been absent from the White House for the previous eight years and for twenty of the past twenty-eight. But the Democrats' status as the minority party is not just a product of its failure to capture the White House; Democrats' fortunes have been declining in all three facets of a political party's existence: in government, in the electorate, and as an organization.

At the national level, the Democratic party-in-government has declined from its once dominant position. Figure 1 shows the percentage of seats in the House and Senate held by Democrats for the 100<sup>th</sup> through 109<sup>th</sup> Congresses. In the 100<sup>th</sup> Congress, which sat from 1987 to 1989, Democrats held 55 seats in the Senate and 59% of the seats in the House (258 out of 435). Following the "Republican Revolution" that took place in the 1994 elections, the Democrats lost the majority and faced the prospect of serving in the 104<sup>th</sup> Congress with only 48 Senate seats and 204 seats in the House (47%). In the five Congresses since, Democrats have been unable to get closer than a 9 seat deficit in the House; in the Senate, they escaped minority status for only 17 months as a result of the defection of James Jeffords (Ind-VT) – a situation which was promptly reversed by Jim Talent's (R-MO) defeat of incumbent Senator Jean Carnahan (D-MO) in the 2002 elections. By the 109<sup>th</sup> Congress, the Democratic minority – 45 seats in the Senate and 202 in the House (46%) – is at its lowest since the 80<sup>th</sup> Congress of 1947-1949.

[Figure 1 about here]

Even at the state level, the Democratic party-in-government has been in decline. For the first time in five decades, Republicans hold a majority of state legislative seats, a

plurality of state legislatures, and a majority of governorships. Figure 2 displays how the fortunes of the Democratic Party have declined at the state level for the past twenty years. In 1986 Democrats held nearly seventy percent of governorships and almost sixty percent of state legislative seats. They also possessed outright control of 28 state legislatures (with 9 controlled by Republicans and 11 split). Following 1994, however, the number of Democratic officeholders at the state level began a steady decline that has lasted a decade. In 2002, Democrats reached a low point when Republicans captured a majority of state legislative seats for the first time since the 1940s. By 2004, Democrats controlled only 17 state legislatures (compared to 21 controlled by Republicans and 11 split) with only 3662 seats. The only (relative) bright spot for the Democrats has appeared in Governors' mansions, where a steep decline in 1994 (from 29 to 18 governorships) has rebounded to near parity with the Republicans. Going into the 2005 elections, there are Democratic governors in 22 states and Republican ones in the other 28.

[Figure 2 about here]

With respect to the party-in-the-electorate, the evidence – though not as dramatic – still points to declining identification with the Democratic Party. Figure 3 shows trends over the past twenty years for three different measures of party identification. In the National Election Studies, identification with the Democratic Party actually remains fairly stable, with around half of the sample in each cross-sectional study identifying as strong, weak, or independent-leaning Democrats. In polling done for ABC News/Washington Post and for The Harris Poll, independents are not grouped into the party toward which they might lean. Trends in both of these poll show declines in identification with the Democratic Party of roughly five percentage points from high-

water marks achieved in the late 1980s. For the Democratic Party, the most troubling evidence comes from the ABC News/Washington Post poll, which shows that identification with the Republican Party had caught up to Democratic party identification in 2003, the complete reversal of an eight-to-nine point identification gap that existed in the mid- to late-1990s.

[Figure 3 about here]

The final piece of the Democratic Party's decline involves the party-as-organization. While not strictly an example of party decline, the relative decline of the Democratic Party vis-à-vis the Republican Party can be seen in a brief analysis of campaign finance over the past nine election cycles. Figure 4 shows the amount of cash on hand (with outstanding debts subtracted) at the end of each election cycle for the Democratic and Republican parties at all levels<sup>1</sup>. In the late 1980s and early 1990s, the Democrats and Republicans faced similar financial situations following the fall election campaign<sup>2</sup>. Whether they had positive or negative balances in their bank accounts, Republicans and Democrats were never more than \$5 or \$6 million apart at the end of the 1988 through 1996 election cycles. But beginning in 1998, the Republican Party began to establish wide margins in end-of-cycle cash-on-hand. Following the 2004 election, Democratic Party coffers had nearly \$28 million less than did Republican accounts. Starting from so far behind makes it that much harder for the Democrats to build organizations and wage campaigns in an effort to shed their minority status.

[Figure 4 about here]

Given the decline (or relative decline) of all facets of the Democratic Party, it is not surprising that Democrats enter 2005 as a minority party in search of the keys to

renewal. This renewal will take twin paths. On one hand, the organization that is the Democratic Party will have to select new leadership and undertake the fundraising and organizational development tasks necessary to make them competitive in future elections. On the other hand, the Democratic party-in-government will have to provide the public face of the party while at the same time attempting to influence public policy from a severely compromised position. We will address those two paths to renewal in a moment, but first let's review how the Democrats came to their current state of affairs.

### Reasons For The Decline

The plight that the Democrats find themselves in entering 2005 is the product of forces both within and beyond their control. On the latter count, much of the decline of the Democratic Party can be attributed to the forces that have been realigning American politics since the late 1960s. But poor decisions by party leaders have also contributed to the decline. Taken together, realignment and the Democrats' own behavior go a long toward explaining how Democrats ended up in the minority.

The Democratic New Deal coalition formed in the 1930s was fragile to begin with. It was made up of an unlikely combination of farmers, organized labor, immigrants, Catholics, Jews, African-Americans, and (conservative) Southern whites (Carmines and Stanley, 1992). When the Democratic Party embraced the Civil Rights movement in the 1960s, the Southern wing of the party no longer felt that it could no longer be part of that coalition. So while some realignment occurs when individual preferences change, in this case it was a choice by party leaders – to embrace civil rights – that resulted in the party issue position to change. As a result, Southern whites, for

whom race and states' rights were of paramount importance, began leaving the Democratic Party. The Republicans recognized the electoral importance of this shift and developed their "Southern Strategy" to court the disaffected Southerners (Aistrup, 1989).

It took years for the realignment of the South to take place – and event now the South is still a two-party region (with the Republicans admittedly the majority party) rather than one-party dominant as it was for the 100 years following the Civil War (Aldrich, 2000; Black and Black, 2003). During this realignment period, Southerners (particularly whites) repeatedly voted Republican for president while maintaining Democratic party identification (Erikson et al., 1989). Yet by the 1990s party identification among Southern whites was trending Republican (Aistrup, 1996), and demographic changes were taking place that would magnify the power of the South in national politics.

For several decades population in the United States has been shifting toward the Southern and Western states at the expense of states in the Midwest and Northeast (Mills, 2001). As a result, Southern Congressional delegations have been growing larger. In 1985, Southern states<sup>3</sup> accounted for 130 seats in the House of Representatives, or 29.9% of the body. By 2004, those same states accounted for 142 seats (32.6%). And the growth in Southern Congressional delegations means that the South has also grown in significance in the Electoral College. In the 1988 election the thirteen southern states accounted for 147 electoral votes; by 2004 they accounted for 168.

Taken together, the growth of the South and its increasing identification with the Republican Party have made it difficult for Democrats to win in a region once considered a Democratic stronghold. Congressional delegations that were 63.8% Democratic in

1985 are today 64.1% Republican. And Democrats running for president face the same disadvantage. Bill Clinton, an Arkansas native, won five Southern states and over 650 Southern counties in each of his two presidential victories. Things got worse in 2000, when Al Gore (a native of Tennessee) won no Southern states in 2000 and only managed to win 294 counties in Southern states. The decline continued in 2004, with John Kerry again failing to win electoral votes from any Southern state; furthermore, he could only win 216 counties in Southern states, compared to George W. Bush's victory in 1124 (Brownstein, 2004). The implication is that the South now consistently provides Republican presidential candidates with more than sixty percent of the electoral votes required to elect a president. Furthermore, recent projections by the Census Bureau suggest that further demographic shifts toward the South and West will only strengthen the Republicans' electoral position (Lambro, 2005).

However, this realignment story is not solely about the South. Like the South, the country as a whole is becoming more conservative (King, 2002). Following the 1968 election, Republicans set out to attract "traditional" Democrats who felt at odds with their party on issues of national security, law and order, preferential treatment for women and minorities, and social issues such as abortion and school prayer (Edsall and Edsall, 1991; see also Rae, 1992). In the first two elections of the 1980s, Ronald Reagan would attract significant support from these individuals, later dubbed "Reagan Democrats." By the 1990s Republicans had managed to demonize Democratic positions on many issues as too liberal, going so far as to establish a negative connotation to the word "liberal" itself (Lakoff, 2004). Coupled with a nationalized campaign and a compelling issue agenda, a

broader realignment process culminated with 1994 election in which Republicans took control of both houses of Congress for the first time in forty years (Burnham, 1996).

But one should not solely attribute the Democrats' misfortunes to the processes of realignment. Democrats themselves certainly share in the blame, as many of their decisions over the past ten to twenty years have proven unwise. In the realm of presidential politics, Democrats have consistently ignored the lessons of history when nominating candidates for the presidency. Since the mid-1980s, Democratic presidential nominees from the Northeast (Dukakis in 1988, Kerry in 2004) and the Midwest (Mondale in 1984) have all lost. Nominees from the border-South (Clinton in 1992 and 1996, Gore in 2000) have either won or come extremely close to doing so. Given the inability of Democrats to win without at least a few electoral votes from the South (Brownstein, 2004), their decision to nominate candidates who would not appeal to Southern voters to some degree explains their relative absence from the White House over the last two decades.

While the Democrats' tendency to nominate Northern liberals has kept them out of the White House, it is not as if they haven't been trying extremely hard to break out of that rut. In fact, their singular focus on winning the presidential race has caused Democrats to lose focus on other important races, most notably those for state legislatures. (Relative) inattention to state legislative campaigns throughout the 1980s and 1990s has led to the current state of affairs where Democrats now control a minority of state legislatures and a minority of state legislative seats. As a result, Republicans dominated post-2000 redistricting in several key states (*Business Week*, 2004), further hampering Democratic efforts to retake control of Congress.

Democrats have also created problems for themselves in other areas related to campaigning. First, the explosion of soft money flowing into the Democratic Party beginning in 1996 was devoted to issue advocacy television advertising (Magleby, 2000) rather than grassroots mobilization and party building. By the early 2000s the party re-discovered the importance of these two activities (Nagourney, 2002), but efforts to engage in sophisticated mobilization techniques in 2004 were surpassed by Republican efforts (Dionne, 2004). A related problem came from the Democrats' traditional reliance on labor unions to mobilize their own members as well as other Democratic voters. As labor unions have declined over the past twenty years, their ability to be effective campaign agents for the Democratic Party has also declined. The recent split of two large unions from the AFL-CIO will further hamper labor's ability to campaign on behalf of Democrats (Edsall, 2005). As a result, the transformation of a key constituency is hurting the Democratic Party in the wallet, on the street, and in the voting booth.

#### The "Present" of the Democratic Party

The Democrats faced two great challenges as they began their sixth Congress (the 109<sup>th</sup>, beginning January 4, 2005) as the minority party. For one, the remaining Democrats in government were charged with trying to promote the Democratic agenda – or at least slow down the Republican Agenda. But Democrats also faced the challenge of rebuilding the party organization in a way that might make future electoral success possible. By the end of September, 2005, the Democratic Party had achieved only moderate success on either front.

## The (Minority) Party in Government

The first task for Democrats following the 2004 elections was the selection of new leadership. Without an occupant in the White House, Democrats would rely on a Congressional leader to be both the public face of the Democrats in government as well as the field general, marshalling the Democratic response to the Republican agenda. And that Congressional leader would not be Tom Daschle. The Senator from South Dakota was the sitting minority leader and, until his narrow defeat at the hands of John Thune, was considered the leader of the Democrats in Washington. Labeled as “obstructionist”, Daschle lost in a state where his opposition to President George W. Bush’s agenda and judicial nominees was not well received (Morgan and Dewar, 2004).

New leadership quickly took shape. Succeeding Daschle as Senate Minority Leader would be Harry Reid, the former minority whip who easily won reelection in 2004. Besides Reid’s ascension to the top post, the top leaders of the Democratic minority in the Senate stepped aside; out would be Barbara Mikulski as caucus secretary and Jon Corzine as chairman of the Democratic Senatorial Campaign Committee. In their places, Democrats selected Dick Durbin as the new minority whip, Debbie Stabenow as caucus secretary, Chuck Schumer as chairman of the DSCC.

House leadership, on the other hand, barely changed with the start of the 109<sup>th</sup> Congress. Nancy Pelosi, who ascended to the position of House Minority Leader two years early, would remain the top Democrat in the House. In addition, Steny Hoyer remained as Minority Whip and Bob Menendez stayed on as chairman of the Democratic caucus. The only change in the top leadership was the replacement of the late-Bob

Matsui with Rahm Emanuel as chairman of the Democratic Congressional Campaign Committee.

Together, Reid and Pelosi faced the task of working together to create a viable message for Congressional Democrats as well as substantive positions on a host of issues. Unfortunately, the relationship between the two top Democrats did not get off to good start. On issues such as judicial nominees and the race for Democratic National Committee chairperson, Reid and Pelosi could not come to a consensus position, and subsequently the two leaders continued to have difficulties coordinating their positions and strategies (Nichols, 2005).

Even in the midst of Republican difficulties – declining approval ratings for President Bush, mounting casualties in Iraq, and public disappointment with the administration’s response to Hurricane Katrina – Democrats were unable to maintain a coherent message (Fournier, 2005). On the biggest issue of the Bush presidency, the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, Democrats failed to offer a compelling public policy alternative. Democrats in Congress overwhelmingly supported Bush’s decision to go to war in Afghanistan – all 49 Senate Democrats and only one of 204 House Democrats voted to authorize the use of force in Afghanistan. Even on the more controversial policy of war in Iraq, nearly forty percent of House Democrats and almost 43 percent of Senate Democrats voted to give Bush authority to launch an invasion to depose Saddam Hussein. This lack of unity-in-opposition among the Democrats came back to haunt them in the 2004 elections, as their presidential nominee had to defend his initial support of the incumbent president’s policy while offering a critique and a compelling argument for changing leaders in the middle of a war. Obviously, he was unable to do so.

Another key policy area for the Democrats in 2005 was the debate over President Bush's nominees to the Federal judiciary. Early in the year Senate Democrats raised objections to several Appellate court nominees, arguing that President Bush had nominated extreme conservatives to the bench. Unable to defeat the nominees either in committee or on the floor, the Senate Democratic minority was forced to rely on its only remaining weapon – the filibuster. Senate Democrats came together to prevent confirmation votes on seven of the most conservative nominees. The Administration and the Senate Republican majority countered that the Democrats were being obstructionist by denying an up-or-down vote to well-qualified nominees. To break the impasse, Senate Majority Leader Bill Frist threatened to use the “nuclear option” of changing Senate rules to prevent filibusters on judicial nominations. As a showdown loomed, several centrist Democrats struck a deal to avoid losing the filibuster by allowing votes on three of the nominees.

Even though they claimed victory, Senate Democrats did not emerge from the filibuster showdown with much to show for it. (Number) individuals whom the Democrats considered too conservative were allowed to take the Federal bench. Furthermore, Democrats were forced to agree not to use the filibuster in the context of nominations except in “extreme circumstances.” Functionally, the deal hamstrung Democrats when “the big one” came in August, 2005 – the nomination of John Roberts to be Chief Justice of the United States. Despite his conservative leanings, Democrats could not bring themselves to filibuster the well-qualified nominee. As a result, centrist Democrats split with the party-line opposition to the nomination; three of the Judiciary Committee's eight Democrats voted in favor of Roberts' approval out of committee

(Holland, 2005a), and on the floor 23 of the 45 Democrats voted to confirm Roberts as the nation's seventeenth Chief Justice (Holland, 2005b).

The only topic on which Congressional Democrats achieve any success was their response to Hurricanes Katrina and Rita. The devastation wrought by the two storms gave them an opportunity to support a public policy favored by their constituents (funds for emergency relief and rebuilding) as well as a chance to criticize Republican for the Bush Administration's late and lacking response to the crisis in the aftermath of Katrina. At the time Hurricane Katrina hit, the administration was witnessing a severe downturn in public opinion toward its policies on the war in Iraq. Rather than rapidly responding to the hurricane crisis and thereby diverting the nation's attention, the federal response was a case of "too little, too late." Attempts to avoid "the blame game" did not work, and efforts to shift blame to state and local officials were only marginally successful. This led to highly disapproving public opinion toward the administration's response to Katrina (while public approval of the war in Iraq continued to wane). Democrats used this opportunity to bring forth a broader critique of the Republican agenda, tying mismanagement of the hurricane response to mismanagement of the war. Finally on message, Democrats also were able to tie in criticism of the tax cuts passed in Bush's first term, the funding cuts forced on the Federal Emergency Management Agency and the Army Corps of Engineers, and the administration's unwillingness to address global climate change. On the attack, Democrats seized the opportunity to stall the president's domestic agenda – including proposed reforms to Social Security – and helped drive Bush to the lowest job approval ratings of his presidency.

## Reinvigorating the Party Organization

Following the disappointing performance in the 2004 elections, the Chairman of the Democratic National Committee stepped down. Terry McAuliffe had announced his plan to leave the position nearly nine months earlier, and after Election Day 2004 the search was on for a new leader and new energy for the Democratic Party.

Several candidates for the position emerged: former presidential candidate Howard Dean; former Texas congressman Martin Frost; Simon Rosenberg, founder of the New Democratic Network; Donnie Fowler, a long-time party activist and son of a former Democratic chairman; former Indiana congressman and 9/11 Commission member Tim Roemer; former Denver Mayor Wellington Webb; and Ohio state party chairman David Leland (Jackson, 2005). Several dynamics were at play as members of the Democratic National Committee considered the candidates. The new chair would have to be a strong fundraiser, an articulate voice for the party's message, and a party building committed to strengthening the grassroots (Marlantes, 2004; Balz, 2005). But in the end the choice of a new leader boiled down to a choice between two visions of the future of the Democratic Party; would the Democrats be a Progressive counterpoint to the Republicans or would they be a centrist party.

By February 2005 that question had been answered. Meeting in Washington, DNC committee members elected Dean to be the next party chairman. And while this was largely received as a win for the Progressive vision for the Democratic Party, Dean also worked to reach out to the center – and even to Republicans – in an effort to broaden the appeal of the Democratic Party. To Progressives Dean talked tough, harshly criticizing President Bush and the Republican Party. But in a move to the center, Dean

made a commitment to building Democratic state parties in all fifty states, including Republican strongholds (Shepard, 2005), and he promised that the Democrats would pursue a “fifty state strategy” in the 2008 presidential election by reaching out to traditionally Republican voters on moral issues (Smith, 2005).

As 2005 comes to a close, it is still too early to assess fully whether Dean is succeeding as DNC Chairman. However, one important benchmark that is available is the monetary position of the national party. At the end of August, 2005, the Democratic National Committee had raised over \$38 million, year-to-date, and had spent almost \$37 million; they have over \$7.7 million in cash-on-hand at the end of the filing period. These figures compare well against the figures of two years prior, when master fundraiser Terry McAuliffe was at the helm of the DNC. At the end of August 2003, the DNC had raised only \$26 million, spent only \$20 million, and had \$7.8 million in cash-on-hand. So it appears that Dean is at least meeting, if not beating, expectations related to fundraising, though his 2005 figures do pale in comparison to what the Republican National Committee did in the first eight months of 2005 (over \$75 million raised, \$55 million spent, \$35 million cash-on-hand).

### The Future of the Democratic Party

The immediate future of the Democratic Party looks to be a trying time. On one hand, public opinion seems to be favoring Democrats. Table 1 shows the favorability ratings for both parties in three recent polls. In the most recent poll conducted by NBC News and the Wall Street Journal, the public had a slightly favorable view of the Democrats and a slightly unfavorable view of the Republicans (although the differences

are clearly within the margin of error). In the CNN/USA Today poll conducted in July, Democrats had a much more favorable image than the Republicans, as only the Democrats managed to improve lackluster numbers reported in June's ABC News/Washington Post poll.

[Table 1 about here]

On the other hand, however, the prospects for ascension to the majority party in Congress are extremely limited. Though recent polls suggest that voters are more likely to vote for the Democratic candidate for Congress<sup>4</sup> and that they would prefer if the Democratic Party won the 2006 Congressional elections<sup>5</sup>, the electoral math suggests that Democrats will have a hard time capitalizing on those sentiments. In the Senate, where the Democrats have to pick-up six seats to retake the majority, they will be forced to defend more seats than the Republicans will, and the Democrats will have five incumbents running in "red" states compared to only three Republican incumbents running in "blue" states (*Washington Times*, 2005). In the House, the Democrats would need a net gain of fifteen seats, but with only 35 or so seats truly competitive (Straub, 2005), it would take an extremely strong showing by a number of Democratic candidates to regain the majority.

The prospects for 2008 seem a bit better for the Democrats. As President Bush's approval rating sags in the low 40s, Democrats face the prospect of running against an unpopular administration. Barnes (2005) summarizes the advantages that the Democrats have in 2008:

The field of Republican candidates is weak. Democrats will have an easier time than Republicans in duplicating their

strong 2004 voter registration and turnout drive in 2008. Democrats...barely trail Republicans at all in voter appeal. Besides, they may sober up ideologically in 2008. And the media, unless John McCain is the Republican nominee, will be more pro-Democratic than ever (p. 1).

Several candidates have been mentioned as possible nominees, the most notable of which is former First Lady Hillary Clinton. Clinton, who has a sizeable lead in a recent survey on who should be the Democratic nominee<sup>6</sup>, would have the name recognition, media coverage, and fundraising ability to be a serious contender.

Yet the 2008 election is still three years away, and until then the Democrats will remain the minority party (barring unforeseen success in the 2006 Congressional elections). And though a Democratic victory in the presidential race seems like a legitimate possibility, down-ballot success for the Democrats will be a long time in coming and will require significant organizational development and modification of outdated policy positions. But it appears that process is already underway.

## Endnotes

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<sup>1</sup> The cash-on-hand analysis includes figures for each party's national committee, House campaign committee, Senate campaign committee, and state and local party committees.

<sup>2</sup> Some would even argue that parity with the Republicans following the fall campaign was a disadvantage for the Democrats, given the traditional fundraising advantage enjoyed by Republicans (Edsall, 2004).

<sup>3</sup> These states include Alabama, Arkansas, Florida, Georgia, Kentucky, Louisiana, Mississippi, North Carolina, Oklahoma, South Carolina, Tennessee, Texas, and Virginia.

<sup>4</sup> Newsweek poll conducted September 29-30, 2005. Vote for Democrat: 47%. Vote for Republican: 42%. The margin of error is +/- 4. Source: Pollingreport.com.

<sup>5</sup> Fox News/Opinion Dynamics poll conducted September 27-38, 2005. Better if Democrats win: 40%. Better if Republicans win: 32%. The margin of error is +/- 3. Source: Pollingreport.com.

<sup>6</sup> CNN/USA Today/Gallup poll conducted August 5-7, 2005. 40% of Democrats and Democratic leaners want Clinton to receive the nomination; 16% want John Kerry and 15% want John Edwards. The margin of error is +/- 5. Source: Pollingreport.com.

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Table 1  
Public Support for the Parties

Source	Date(s)	Party	Favorable	Neutral	Unfavorable
NBC News/	Sept 9-12,	D	37	29	32
Wall Street Journal	2005	R	37	20	41
CNN/USA Today	July 22-24,	D	52	-	38
Gallup	2005	R	46	-	45
ABC News/	June 2-5,	D	51	-	47
Washington Post	2005	R	49	-	49

Source: Pollingreport.com

Margin of error is +/- 3 for all polls