

## **INJUDICIOUS EMPATHY AND POLLS**

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So many Democrats, even liberal Democrats, are deeply concerned that President George W. Bush's poll ratings are sinking. They are almost crying. Isn't that nice?

Here's how they see it: Bush is not a majority president. Now his approval ratings have fallen in many polls, down to 50 percent in a much-cited Wall Street Journal survey. Conservatism is not a sentiment that is attractive to most Americans. Yet Bush reflexively advances conservative positions. But the issues favor Democrats -- on education, environmentalism, Social Security and health care.

What should Bush do? Obviously, according to Democrats, he should embrace Democratic policies. Then he would go back up in the polls. Sure.

First, look at that 50 percent figure. The assumption is that 50 percent approve of Bush, and that, therefore, 50 percent disapprove. Wrong. The Wall Street Journal/NBC News poll that first reported the Incredible Shrinking Bush shows 50 percent favorable, 35 percent unfavorable and the rest "not sure," a fact not even mentioned in the long Journal article accompanying the poll. Viewed more properly, among people who have an opinion, 59 percent say Bush is doing a good job (i.e. 50 out of 85).

Moreover, that 50 percent figure was on the low side. Recent polling from ABC/Washington Post survey showed 55 percent approval, Bloomberg 54 percent, USA Today/Gallup CNN 52 percent.

So, it's favorable, but there has been a small decline in recent months, perhaps about 5 percentage points. Why? We shall return to that.

Do Democrats have an edge on issues? In recent memory, Democrats always -- always, always, always -- lead on the so-called Mommy issues: education, environment, health and Social Security. And Republicans always -- always, always, always, -- lead on the so-called Daddy issues: defense, taxes, crime and values. (Which set of issues is more important? I'm the wrong guy to ask: I wrote a book called "Values Matter Most.")

Survey research shows that Americans want to have their cake and eat too. Why not? After all, it's only a poll. Voters want more spending and less government, more programs and fewer taxes.

There are two other big considerations to take into account. There are "presidential honeymoons," where the public usually coos about their new president, but not for long. Bush has been in office for about half a year, and the honeymoon is probably over.

And there is the economy. Since the early fall of last year -- before Bush became president -- the economy has been about flat. That usually correlates with declining presidential-approval ratings. If the economy improves, Bush's poll numbers will probably rise. If the economy tumbles into recession, his polls will almost surely fall.

One way of seeing how Americans feel politically is through the standard question that asks: "Would you describe your political beliefs as conservative, moderate or liberal?" A recent poll by the Princeton Survey Research Associates shows that 37 percent of the public self-categorizes as moderate, 35 percent conservative and 21 percent liberal, which is about average for recent decades.

But the same poll also surveyed "policy makers" and "the media." Just 18 percent of policy makers self-described themselves as conservatives, about half of the national average. And just 6 percent of the media called

themselves "conservative," about one-sixth the national average.

Perhaps that's part of Bush's perceived problem. Many in the press can't get over the idea that "conservatism" is a flawed ideology. It is regarded, by liberals, as a view that is more "against," than "for," with few constructive solutions available. But in the early 1980s Sen. Daniel P. Moynihan, a Democrat, announced that Republicans, not Democrats, had become the party of new ideas.

If asked by a pollster if I approve of the job President Bush is doing, I would say I do.

If asked what grade I would assign him as president, I would say B+. But if asked how is he doing at educating the public to understand his compassionate conservative beliefs, I'd say C+ at most.

For example, I agree with his ideas on energy. Price caps would neither raise production nor reduce demand. That's just what Bush asserted. He asserted it, but he didn't explain it. And it takes a brief paragraph or two of Conservatism 101 to make it sink in. (When prices are high, producers produce more, which increases supply, which lowers prices, after a while.)

Soon we will be debating the partial privatization of Social Security. Many Democrats will claim it will wreck the system. It will do no such thing. It will almost surely raise the pension pay out above what it would otherwise be. But, Bush cannot just assert it; he must explain it. Or his polls will go down, and the Democrats will continue to shed tears for him.

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