

Humphrey Institute Survey: Bush and Kerry Deadlocked in Wisconsin

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Senator John Kerry has moved into a statistical tie with President George W. Bush among likely voters in Wisconsin, according to the Humphrey Institute Survey. Bush enjoyed a 4 point edge among likely voters in the mid-summer Humphrey Survey and consistently led during September, opening a double digit advantage in three other polls. The survey was conducted of 623 likely voters from October 14, 2004 to October 19, 2004.

Other key findings include:

- Support for third party candidates has declined from 6 points in the mid-summer Humphrey Survey to 2 points in the most recent poll, neutralizing their impact on the Bush-Kerry contest.
- Bush's double-digit advantage among independents has been replaced with a Kerry lead.
- The critical swing group of independents has improved its evaluation of Kerry's ability to handle 6 of the 7 issues on which they rated both candidates.
- In terms of the issues that independents single out as most important in the 2004 presidential election, Bush is helped by the slippage of issues that his opponent dominates (health care and Medicare) while Kerry is buoyed by more attention to the economy (now the dominant concern of independents).
- Bush's approval rating continues to hover around the symbolically important 50-percent floor, with more independents expressing disapproval than approval of the President's job performance.
- While the Bush campaign has successfully increased the perception among independents that Kerry is indecisive and "flip flops," the Kerry campaign has reversed the President's image as "strong" and now enjoys a slight advantage.
- Kerry continues to struggle to establish a gender gap in Wisconsin partly because women are more concerned about terrorism.

Kerry Pulls Even in Wisconsin

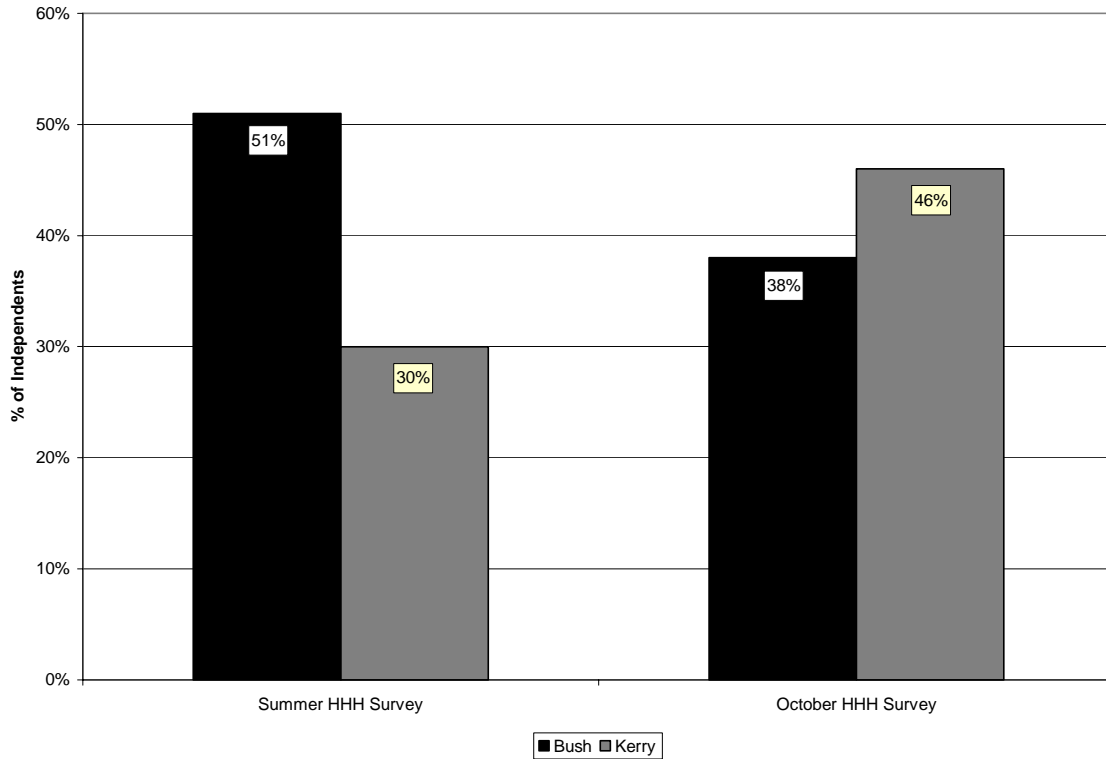
The latest Humphrey Institute Survey shows Bush with a one point lead (49% to 48%). Given the margin of error (plus or minus 4 points), the presidential race in Wisconsin is a statistical toss up.

Horse Race in Wisconsin Among Likely Voters

	Bush	Kerry	Nader	Badnarik	Don't Know/ Other
Two-person Race	49%	48%	*	*	3%
Republicans	94%	5%	*	*	1%
Independents	38%	46%	*	*	16%
Democrats	5%	94%	*	*	1%
With Third Parties	48%	47%	1.7%	0.5%	3%
Republicans	94%	5%	0%	0%	1%
Independents	35%	46%	6%	3%	11%
Democrats	5%	92%	2%	1%	2%

A major reason that the race has tightened up in Wisconsin is that Bush's double-digit advantage among independents who do not lean toward either the Democrats or Republicans has been reversed. Three months ago, Bush enjoyed a 21 point advantage among these swing voters in the two-man race and a 15 point bulge after including third party candidates, according to the Humphrey Survey. Today, John Kerry has opened up an 8 point lead among independents in the two man race and an 11 point advantage in the four person contest.

Horse Race in Wisconsin Among Independents in Bush-Kerry Contest



The unity of Republicans and Democrats behind their party's nominee is above 90 percent, even with third party options. This is quite striking and departs from the typical pattern of defections (especially among Democrats). The unity of the base means that the race in Wisconsin will be decided by voter turnout and whether President Bush can win over swing voters who are independent of both major parties.

Third Party Dud?

As the presidential race heads for the finish line, support for third party candidates has declined from 6 points in the mid-summer Humphrey Survey to 2 points in the most recent poll. Independent Ralph Nader's support fell from 4.5% during the summer to 1.7 points currently; the Libertarian Party candidate (Michael Badnarik) is drawing less than 1%.

Despite earlier signs that third party candidates might tilt the election, the latest Humphrey Survey finds that they are not altering the Bush-Kerry contest in Wisconsin. Bush's one-point margin in the two-man race remained unchanged after including Nader and Badnarik. Third party candidates also did not alter the race in Iowa, according to the Humphrey Survey released last week.

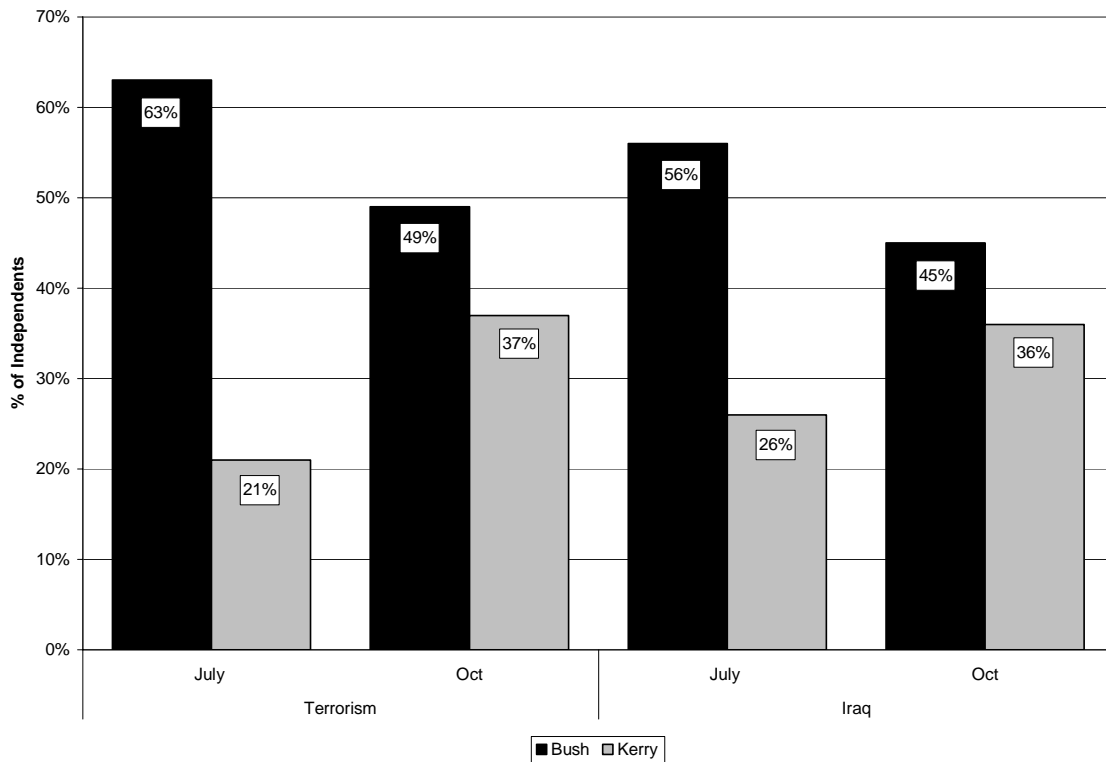
Impact of Presidential Debates

The three presidential debates and one vice presidential exchange helped Kerry pull even with Bush. They also altered the evaluations of each candidate's ability to handle pressing challenges among two sets of critical voting blocks. Comparisons between the October and summer Humphrey Surveys show that party loyalists increased their favorable rating of their party's candidate in handling domestic and foreign policy. This is not surprising given the solid unity of each party.

One of the most important findings of the Humphrey Survey of Wisconsin is that the critical group of independents has improved its evaluation of Kerry's ability to handle 6 of the 7 issues on which they rated both candidates.

Although a bit lower than the summer readings, Bush continues to enjoy large 10 to 20 point advantages on terrorism and Iraq among all likely voters and among independents. The most striking change since the summer, however, is the more favorable ratings of Kerry on national security issues. Independents increased their rating of Kerry as better able to handle terrorism by 16 points (from 21% to 37%) and raised their evaluation of the Senator's ability to better handle Iraq by 10 points (26% to 36%). These issues do remain foundations of political strength for the President but Kerry has narrowed the gap.

Independents Rate Bush and Kerry on Handling of Terrorism and Iraq

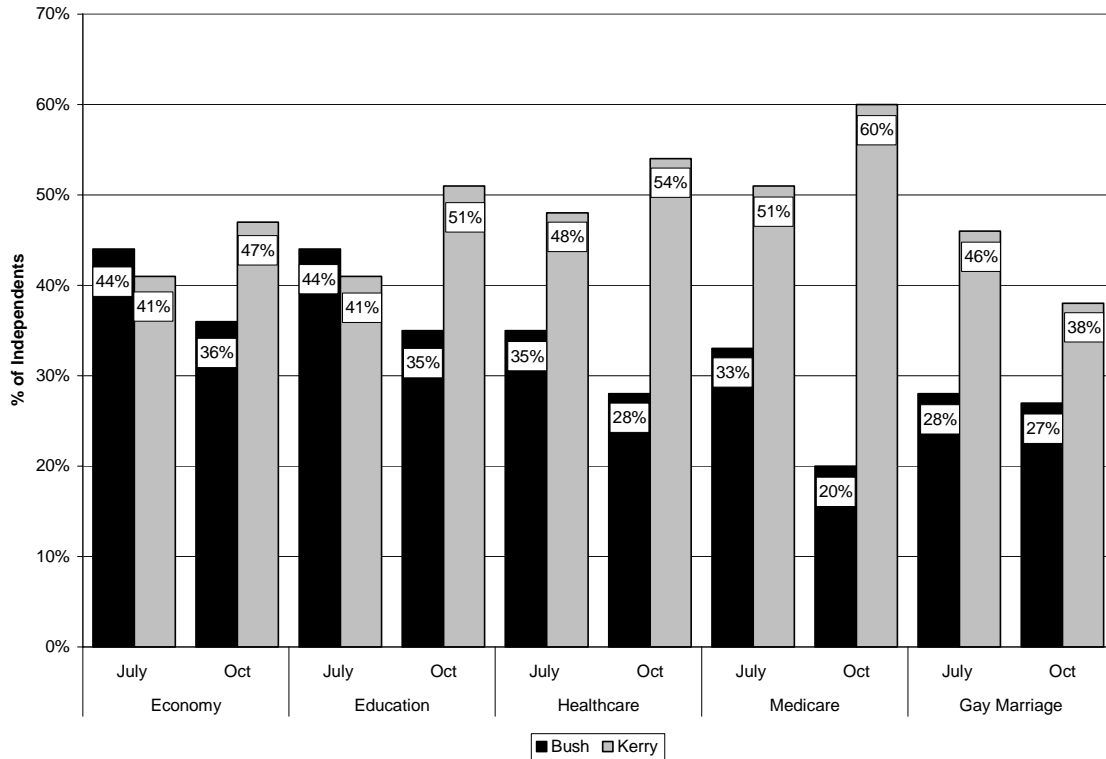


Kerry continues to hold an advantage over Bush on domestic issues among all likely voters and has strengthened his standing on these policies among independents. The

Senator picked up 6 points in the evaluations of independents regarding which candidate would best handle the economy, giving him an 11 point edge over Bush. Kerry's improvement on this issue among independents appears to be aided by a 22 point rise in the perception that the overall economy has gotten worse (reaching 40% as compared to 24% who say it has gotten better and 35% who say it has stayed the same).

Kerry has widened his dominance of health care and Medicare drug benefits among independents by 6 and 9 points, respectively. He now enjoys advantages over Bush of 26 points on health care and 40 points on Medicare. The Senator's advantage on education also strengthened.

Independents Rate Bush and Kerry on Handling of Domestic Issues



Kerry continues to have an advantage on gay marriage among independents, indicating that Bush's appeals to social conservatives has hurt him among swing voters. But Kerry's lead on this social issue has weakened a bit. Although the President reversed a narrow Kerry advantage to take a 3 point edge among all likely voters, Kerry continues to enjoy a double digit advantage among independents, though it has declined from an 18 point bulge to an 11 point lead.

Swing Voters Show More Concern about Economy and National Security

Compared to the summer Humphrey Survey, the concerns of all voters changed little if at all – Iraq and terrorism were singled out as the single most important issue in the 2004

presidential election by slightly fewer Wisconsins and the economy continued to be identified by 26% of voters.

Partisans echo the agenda of their standard bearers – Republicans loyally single out terrorism as the most important problem (35%) while about a quarter of Democrats point to the economy and the war in Iraq as the critical issues.

The interesting story is the changes among independents that offer good news for both candidates. President Bush is helped by the decline among in independents who single out health care (down 10 points) and Medicare (off by 4 points) as the country’s biggest challenges – issues that play to Kerry’s strengths.

On the other hand, Kerry’s efforts to focus the attention of independent voters on the economy as the single most important issue in the 2004 presidential election pushed the issue up 11 points and established it as the predominant concern among independents (39%). Gay marriage is no longer a concern of independents.

Single Most Important Issue in Presidential Vote among Wisconsin Independents

	Summer Survey (6/21- 7/12/04)	Fall Survey (10/14-10/19/04)	Change
Economy	28	39	+11
Iraq	10	10	0
Health Care	23	13	-10
Terrorism	12	13	+1
Education	7	5	-2
Medicare	9	5	-4
Gay Marriage	10	0	-10
Other	1	15	+14
Don’t Know	0	1	+1

Note: The exact response categories are: the economy and jobs; the war in Iraq; health care; the U.S. campaign against terrorism; education; Medicare and prescription drugs; gay marriage; or something else.

Bush’s Approval Rating Remains Steady if Mixed

The evaluation of the President’s job performance by all likely voters in Wisconsin was mixed, though largely unchanged since the summer. Bush’s approval rating continued to hover around the symbolically important 50 percent floor, which can signal trouble for an incumbent. His approval rating among likely voters stood at 53% while disapproval was 45%, virtually unchanged from the summer Humphrey Survey (54% versus 45%).

The big story lies among independents where his approval rating declined sharply since the summer. Approval of Bush’s job performance decreased from 63% to 42% today and his disapproval rating rose from 34% to 52%. The result is that more independents now disapprove than approve of the President’s job performance.

President's Approval Rating among Independents

	Approve	Disapprove	Don't Know/ Other
Summer Survey (6/21- 7/12/04)	63%	34%	3%
Fall Survey (10/14-10/19/04)	42%	52%	6%

Character Attacks Hurt Bush and Kerry

Both campaigns have effectively tarnished the perception of each candidate's personal traits, with some of the biggest changes coming among independents. The Bush campaign's criticisms of John Kerry for indecisiveness have increased the perception that he "flip flops" among all likely voters and independents. By a large 34 point margin, voters see that trait as better applying to Kerry than to Bush – a 6 point increase among independents.

In one of the most surprising reversals, President Bush no longer holds an advantage among independents on strong leadership, though he has a 5 point edge among all likely voters. Among independents, Bush's dominance on this personality trait has shifted from a 36 point advantage in the summer Humphrey Survey to an advantage for Kerry (4 points). In addition, Kerry's attacks on the President for being stubborn have registered with Wisconsin independents. The proportion of independents who agreed with this criticism jumped 18 points and now represents the largest gap between the candidates (58 points).

Kerry is seen as more "caring" than Bush with a modest 7 point margin among all voters. A large 17 point difference has opened up, though, among independents.

Independents Rate Bush and Kerry on Personality Traits

	Bush	Kerry	Spread
FLIP FLOP			
Summer Survey (6/21- 7/12/04)	27%	55%	Kerry +28
Fall Survey (10/14-10/19/04)	24%	58%	Kerry +34
CARES			
Summer Survey (6/21- 7/12/04)	33%	33%	Even
Fall Survey (10/14-10/19/04)	31%	48%	Kerry +17
STRONG LEADER			
Summer Survey (6/21- 7/12/04)	57%	21%	Bush +36
Fall Survey (10/14-10/19/04)	37%	41%	Kerry +4
STUBBORN			
Summer Survey (6/21- 7/12/04)	51%	15%	Bush +36
Fall Survey (10/14-10/19/04)	69%	11%	Bush +58

The Missing “Gender Gap”

John Kerry is not benefiting from the gender gap in Wisconsin that usually helps Democrats. Both the October and summer Humphrey Surveys indicate that women are evenly splitting their support between Kerry and Bush. The efforts of the Kerry campaign to reestablish the gender gap have not worked. Part of the problem is that the proportion of women who identify terrorism as the single most important issue in the 2004 presidential election rose by 7 points (tying the economy as the highest ranked issue).

About the Survey

The Humphrey Institute of Public Affairs at the University of Minnesota and its 2004 Elections Project designed the survey. The Humphrey Institute and the 2004 Elections Project are non-partisan academic institutions that are committed to rigorous research, quality teaching, and engaged public service. The 2004 Elections Project has conducted a number of studies and initiatives focusing on state and national elections in the Upper Midwest, including policy briefs, analyses of election returns and public opinion, and voter registration efforts.

Lawrence R. Jacobs directed the survey. Joanne M. Miller provided valuable advice and feedback. Dean J. Brian Atwood offered unstinting support and encouragement for which we are grateful. Cindy Orbovich, Julie C. Lund, and Lark Weller generously contributed to preparing and distributing the report. Melanie Burns provided superior research assistance. No opinions, statements of fact, or conclusions should be attributed to the Humphrey Institute or any of the individuals who offered advice and assistance.

The survey was fielded by the Center for Survey Research and Analysis at the University of Connecticut, which has extensive national and state experience conducting non-partisan surveys on politics and government policy.

The survey was conducted by telephone with a total of 787 adults in Wisconsin from October 14 to October 19, 2004. Of these, 623 respondents were identified as likely to vote. Respondents were identified as likely voters if they self-identified themselves as definitely planning to vote and either 1) reported that they had voted in all or almost all recent elections or 2) they have a great deal of interest in the 2004 campaign. Although most respondents in the sample report having a past history of voting, our likely voter model also is designed to capture other voters based on interest in the 2004 campaign. This helps to include new voters in our sample.

The distribution of party identification among likely voters analyzed in this survey is as follows:

Republican	45%
Independent	13%
Democrat	42%

The sample of telephone exchanges called was randomly selected by a computer from a list of active residential exchanges within the state. Within each exchange, random digits were added to form a complete telephone number, thus permitting access to both listed and unlisted numbers. Within each household, one adult was selected to be the respondent for the survey.

The results have been weighted to take account of household size and number of telephone lines into the residence and to adjust for variations in the sample relating to sex, age, and education.

In theory, in 19 cases out of 20, the results based on the samples in each state will differ by no more than four percentage points in either direction from what would have been obtained by seeking out all adults in the state. For smaller subgroups the margin of sampling error is larger.

In addition to sampling error, the practical difficulties of conducting any survey of public opinion may introduce other sources of error into the poll. Variations in the wording and order of questions, for example, may lead to somewhat different results.