

Crucial Votes in the Race for President: Independent Voters in the Upper Midwest

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Introduction

With both the Democratic and Republican parties firmly shoring up their base, George W. Bush and John Kerry are focusing their efforts down the home stretch on broadening their appeal to the voters who are independent. Voters who do not consider themselves either Democrats or Republicans total as much as one-quarter to 30% of all likely voters in the Upper Midwestern states. Although the number of independents who remain uncommitted to a candidate has shrunk, the independent vote will determine who wins the election.

Kerry is currently winning support of independents by a wide margin in Iowa and a narrow amount in Minnesota and Wisconsin, while Bush holds single-digit leads among independents in South Dakota.

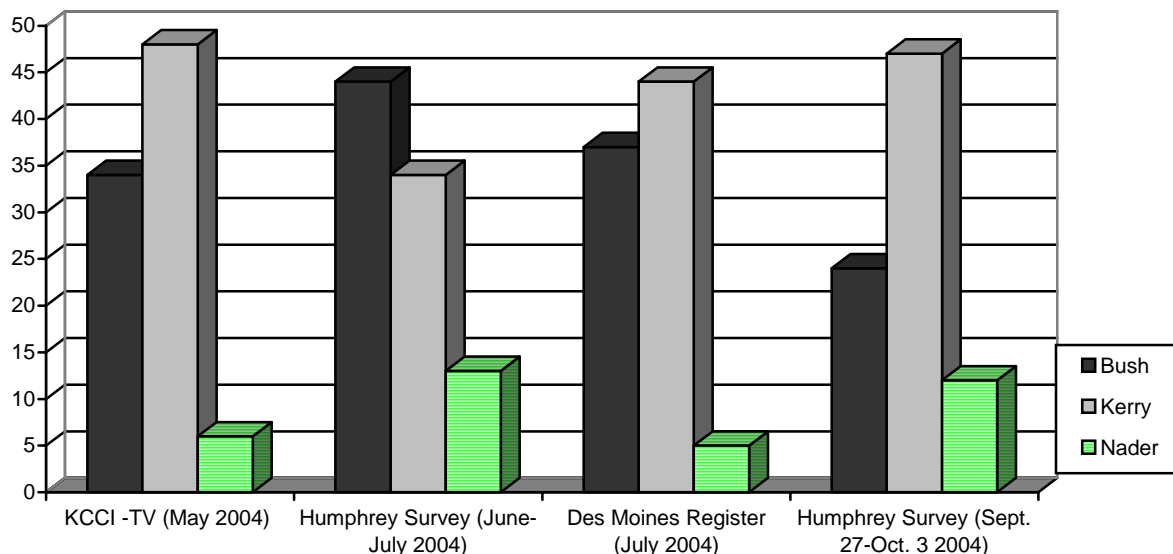
Bush earns broad support from independents in fighting the war on terror, although independents are less inclined to view Bush as the candidate best able to handle the situation in Iraq. Kerry holds a significant advantage over Bush in handling health care, which currently ranks in the second tier of issues of greatest concern to independent voters in Iowa, Minnesota, and Wisconsin. Kerry is also rated higher than Bush as the candidate best able to handle the economy.

Iowa

Iowa is a toss-up state with current polls of likely voters showing Bush with the narrow lead. Two of the three most recent polls show Bush leading by six points – SurveyUSA's October 18 to 20th polls showed the President ahead 51% to 45% and Mason-Dixon's October 14 to 19 poll had him out front 49-43. Nader had one percent in each poll. (Both polls had margins of error of plus or minus 4 points; 3% were undecided in the first poll and 7% in the second). Central Surveys' October 14 to 19 showed the race in a statistical tie (Bush with 45% versus Kerry with 46%). Earlier polls more consistently showed a deadlocked race. An American Research Group survey of likely Iowan voters (October 10-12, +/- 4% margin of error) reported 47% for Bush and 47% for Kerry, with Ralph Nader at 2% and only 4% undecided. A Chicago Tribune poll of likely voters (October 8-11) found that Bush held a 47%-45% advantage against Kerry. Nader drew 1% of Iowans with 7% undecided.

According to available data, Kerry has built a lead over Bush among independent voters in the Hawkeye State. In the Humphrey Survey of likely voters (September 27-October 3), Kerry garners almost twice as many independent supporters as Bush (47%-24%) in a four candidate match-up that includes independent candidate Ralph Nader and Libertarian Michael Badnarik. This is a significant 33-point turnaround for Kerry from a Humphrey Survey taken in July, when Bush held a 44%-34% advantage over Kerry in a four-way race among likely voters. Throughout the year other polling organizations have also shown Kerry with a lead over Bush among independents in a three-way race with Nader. The Des Moines Register Iowa Poll of likely voters had Kerry up 44%-37% with Nader at 5% in mid-July, and a KCCI-TV poll of likely voters had Kerry up 48%-34% with Nader at 6% in late May.

THE INDEPENDENT VOTE FOR PRESIDENT IN IOWA



Independents in Iowa generally approve of Bush's job performance by a 57%-37% margin, according to the October Humphrey Survey (up 16 points since July).

The issue agenda appears to be helping Kerry among independent voters. Independents rate the economy and jobs as the most important issue for their presidential vote in the October Humphrey Survey (32% - up from 22% in July). The situation in Iraq has also become a more important issue, increasing from 13% in July to 28% in October. Health care – an issue on which the Senator holds an advantage – has slid down the public's agenda from 25% in July to 13% in October.

Independents also view the national economy as having gotten worse (52%, up 18 points since July) rather than better (9%, down 19 points since July) according to the October Humphrey Survey. Moreover, in rating their own pocketbooks, nearly three times as many independents believe their own financial situation has gotten worse (23%) than better (8%) – this split was nearly even in July (25% worse, 22% better).

In light of this sense of financial insecurity, independents view Kerry as better able to handle the economy by a 16-point margin (50%-34%, although down a bit from 58%-32% in July). Health care, the other highly rated domestic issue weighing on the decisions of independent voters, is also seen as best handled by Kerry – by a 28-point margin (55%-27%, about the same as in July).

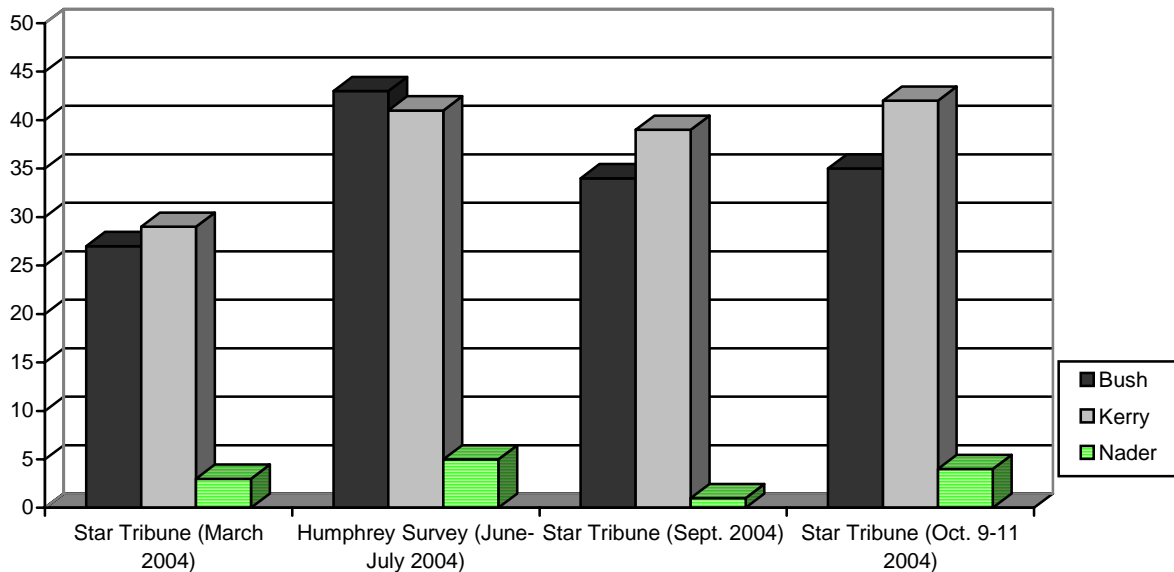
Bush continues to enjoy a significant advantage over Kerry in handling foreign policy issues. According to the October Humphrey Survey, independents give Bush a 13-point advantage on handling terrorism (43%-30%, down 10 points since the July survey) as well as the situation over Iraq (45%-35%). But because Iowa independents view the economy as a much more pressing issue, Kerry has an edge over Bush in the Hawkeye State among these swing voters.

Minnesota

Kerry has consistently (though not uniformly) held a narrow lead over Bush among likely voters in Minnesota during 2004. The Chicago Tribune poll of likely voters (October 8-11) gives Kerry a two-point edge – 45% to 43% – well within the poll's margin of error (+/- 4.4%). Nader polls at 2% with 10% still undecided. A Star Tribune poll of likely voters (October 9-11, +/- 3.4%) shows Kerry with a five-point lead over Bush 48%-43%. Like the Chicago Tribune poll, the Star Tribune poll finds Nader garnering the support of just 2% of likely voters.

Kerry holds a seven-point advantage over Bush (42%-35%) among independents in the Gopher state in a seven-way match-up of presidential candidates, according to the October 9-11 Star Tribune poll of likely voters. However, neither candidate has been able to build a large, consistent advantage over the other. Kerry led Bush by two points among independents early in the campaign (29%-27%) according to a late March Star Tribune poll of likely voters in a three-way match-up with Nader. In a July Humphrey Survey of likely voters, Bush led Kerry by two points (43%-41%) in a four-way match-up of likely voters that included Nader (5%) and Badnarik (2%). The September Star Tribune poll showed Kerry with a five-point lead over Bush (39%-34%) in a seven-candidate match-up of likely voters.

THE INDEPENDENT VOTE FOR PRESIDENT IN MINNESOTA



Independents in Minnesota have mixed feelings about President Bush. Throughout most of the year likely voters who approved and disapproved of Bush's overall job performance has been almost even. In January, a Star Tribune poll showed 44% approved and 50% disapproved, in a July Humphrey Survey 51% approved and 47% disapproved, and in the September Star Tribune poll 46% approved and 44% disapproved. However, the October 9-11 Star Tribune poll shows Bush has hit a yearly low. Only 39% of likely independent voters approved of his performance while 51% disapproved. The October Star Tribune poll also showed a majority of independents disapproving of Bush's handling of the economy (34% approve, 56% disapprove) and the situation in Iraq (33% approve, 56% disapprove).

Bush and Cheney are also not viewed nearly as favorably by likely independent voters as are Kerry and Edwards according to the October 9-11 Star Tribune poll. Bush is viewed favorably by 41% and unfavorably by 49% with 8% unsure. Kerry is viewed favorable by 50% and unfavorably by just 37% with 10% unsure. Cheney only has a 36% favorable rating and a 49% unfavorable rating with 9% not sure of their impression, compared to a 50% favorable rating for his counterpart John Edwards (27% unfavorable, 14% unsure).

Independents in Minnesota also have a dour view of the state of the nation – 57% believe the United States is pretty seriously off on the wrong track, while only 34% believe it is going in the right direction, according to the October 9-11 Star Tribune poll. The same poll also shows independents to be slightly more inclined to say their financial situation is worse off (33%) than better off (27%) than four years ago, while a plurality believes it is about the same (36%).

When asked which candidate is better able to handle the critical issues, Bush is judged by independents in Minnesota (as in Iowa) as somewhat likely to do a better job with the situation in Iraq and the war on

terrorism. Bush holds a 42%-34% lead over Kerry in handling terrorism and a narrower 40%-37% advantage in handling the situation in Iraq, according to the October 9-11 Star Tribune poll.

On domestic issues, however, Kerry enjoys an advantage. According to the July Humphrey Survey nearly half of independents rate economy and jobs (25%) and health care (20%) as the most important issue for their presidential vote, compared to 21% for the war in Iraq (14%) and the campaign against terrorism (7%). On the higher profile domestic issues, Kerry has an 11-point advantage over Bush in handling the economy (47% to 36%) and a significant 46-point lead in handling health care (64% to 18%).

Wisconsin

In Wisconsin, another Upper Midwestern state where the candidates have fought to a draw so far, a new October 14-19 Humphrey Survey of likely voters shows the race dead even for Bush (48%) and Kerry (47%) in a four-way match-up with Nader (2%) and Badnarik (1%). A new Wisconsin Public Radio-St. Norbert College poll of likely voters (October 4-13) shows Kerry up 48%-43% in a match-up that included Nader and the other minor party candidates. A Chicago Tribune poll of likely voters in Wisconsin (October 8-11) shows Kerry with a four-point lead over Bush at 47%-43%, with Nader at 2%. The St. Norbert College and Tribune polls are the first in months to show Kerry ahead of Bush in the Badger State, although within the margin of error of each.

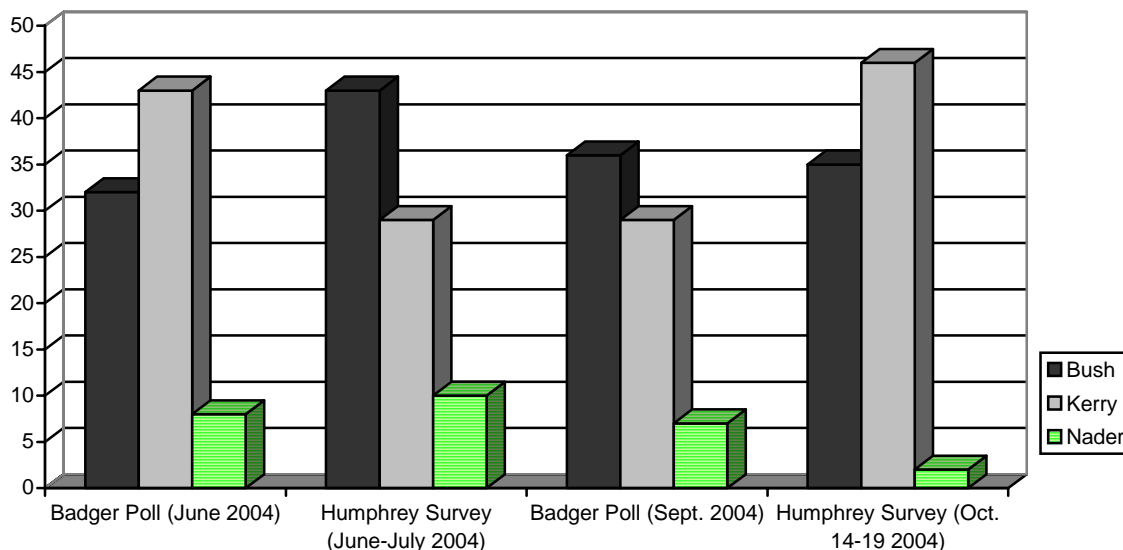
Approximately 25% of adults in Wisconsin are self-described independents according to a series of Badger Polls conducted in 2004. About three in ten Wisconsinites identify themselves as Democrats and three in ten as Republicans (another one in ten adults don't identify themselves as any of these three categories). Winning Wisconsin will require winning over the majority of these independent voters.

Independents do not want to see Bush re-elected by twenty-point margin: 57% would like to see someone else and just 37% would like to see Bush return for four more years according to the September 15-21 Badger Poll of registered voters. More than 52% of independents have said they would like someone else in the White House in five of the last six Badger Polls dating back to December 2003.

In the October Humphrey Survey only 42% of independent Wisconsinites approve of Bush's performance, with 52% disapproving. The September Badger Poll showed only 39% of independent voters think Bush is doing an "excellent" or "good" job in handling his job as president – this is the lowest rating in eight Badger Polls conducted since August 2003. Bush's favorable rating of 47% in the September Badger Poll is down 13 points among independents since October 2003, but has stabilized since March 2004.

Despite these long-running concerns with Bush, independents have only recently been persuaded they might want to turn the reigns over to Kerry. The October Humphrey Survey shows Kerry leading the president by a 46%-35% margin among likely independent voters in a four-way match-up with Nader (6%) and Badnarik (3%). This marks an improvement for Kerry: in the September Badger Poll Bush held a 36%-29% advantage over Kerry (among registered voters), with Ralph Nader and other third party candidates garnering 18% of their support. The July Humphrey Survey of likely independent voters that found 43% supporting Bush, 29% for Kerry, and 19% for Nader and Badnarik.

THE INDEPENDENT VOTE FOR PRESIDENT IN WISCONSIN



Moreover, Kerry's favorable rating of 30% in the September Badger Poll has dropped 17 points among Badger State independents since his Iowa and New Hampshire victories in the Democratic primary season, and his unfavorable rating has jumped from 19% to 45% during that span.

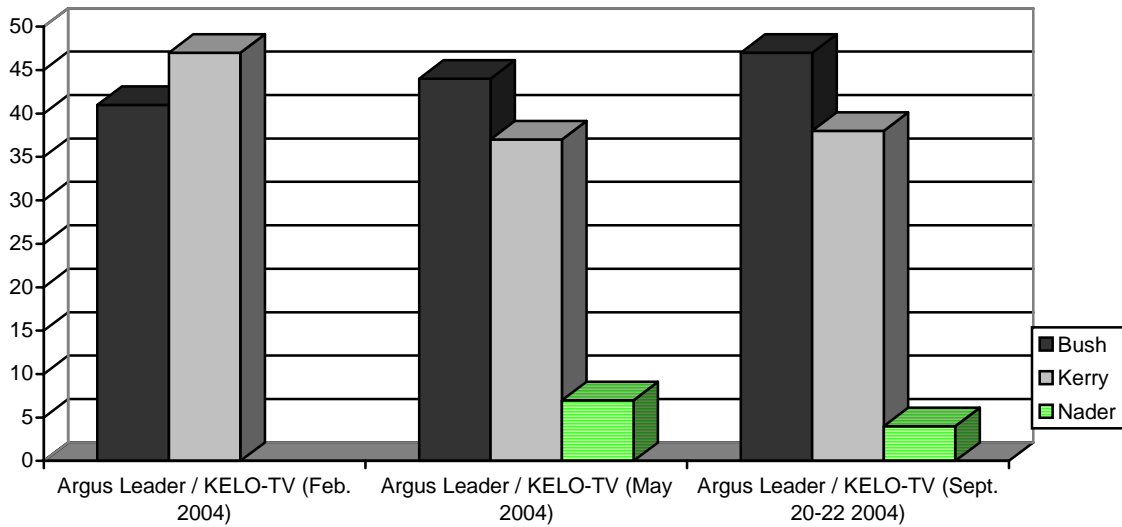
On the issues, the October Humphrey Survey shows Bush is viewed by independents as better able to protect the country from terrorism by a 49%-37% margin. The September Badger Poll had Bush leading on this issue by a much wider 46%-12% margin. On the economy Kerry has maintained an advantage over Bush in all four Badger Polls conducted in 2004 since Kerry became the presumptive nominee, including a 37%-26% lead among independents in September. In the October Humphrey Survey, Kerry holds a similar 47%-36% lead over Bush on the economy. Kerry is also viewed by independents as better able to protect the environment (a 30-point lead in all four Badger polls since late March) as well as dealing with the federal budget (maintaining an eight to 21-point advantage over Bush in these four polls).

South Dakota

In a state where there are many more Republicans than Democrats, Kerry must not only win over his base in South Dakota (he currently has support of 74% of the state's Democrats), but also a clear majority of independents. So far Kerry has failed to do both, and as a consequence he trails Bush by double-digits in South Dakota. Bush currently holds a 13-point lead among all voters, according to a September 20-22 Argus Leader poll of registered voters.

Bush also edges Kerry by nine points among independent voters in a three-way match-up with Nader, although less than half are willing to give the president their support (47%-38%). Independents have increasingly moved to Bush's camp, however. Kerry led 47%-41% against Bush in a two-way match-up among independents in a February 2004 Argus Leader poll of registered voters. In a May Argus Leader poll of registered voters that included Nader, Bush overtook Kerry by a 44%-37% margin. Nader's support among independents has almost been cut in half since the early summer – from seven percent in May to four percent in September. About 10% of independents remain undecided.

THE INDEPENDENT VOTE FOR PRESIDENT IN SOUTH DAKOTA



On the issues, independents in South Dakota tend to be fairly conservative. For example, 57% support an amendment to the U.S. Constitution banning gay marriage with only 26% opposed to the measure, according to the September Argus Leader Poll. Furthermore, independents want abortion made illegal (20%) or restricted (44%) by more than a 2:1 margin over those who want it legal (30%), according to the May Argus Leader Poll.

The September Argus Leader Poll also reveals independents give Bush high marks on his handling of homeland security and the war on terrorism – 64% approve while just 25% disapprove. The poll showed support among independents to be more mixed on Bush’s handling of the situation in Iraq (46% approve, 41% disapprove) and the nation’s economy (47% approve, 41% disapprove). Bush also gets very poor marks on his handling of health care – more than twice as many independents disapprove of the president’s performance (47%) as approve (23%).