

Kerry Pulls Even in Humphrey Survey of Iowa Voters

Lawrence R. Jacobs
McKnight Land Grant Professor
Director, 2004 Elections Project
Humphrey Institute of Public Affairs
University of Minnesota

Joanne M. Miller
Research Associate, 2004 Elections Project
Assistant Professor, Department of Political Science
University of Minnesota

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After Republicans successfully damaged Senator John Kerry's presidential campaign during August, the Democratic candidate has pulled even with President George W. Bush. The second survey of voters in Iowa by the Humphrey Institute shows that the first presidential debate sharply narrowed Bush's advantage on his signature issue (handling terrorism). Kerry did see erosion of his advantages on the economy and other domestic issues, and he continues to be described as someone who "flip flops."

Other findings include:

- Iraq and terrorism rose in prominence as the single most important issue in the eyes of voters.
- Kerry's advantage for "caring" declined.
- Bush's approval rating continues to hover around the symbolically important 50-percent floor.
- Despite claims about the disappearance of the gender gap, Iowan women favor Kerry over Bush by a dozen points.

Kerry Pulls Even in Iowa

Although polls in September showed President George W. Bush with a steady lead of up to six points over Senator John Kerry, the Humphrey Institute survey of 599 likely voters in Iowa shows the Democrat with a narrow one-point edge (48% to 47%) during the last week in September. Given the margin of error (plus or minus 4 point), the presidential race in Iowa should be considered a statistical toss up. The survey was conducted September 27, 2004, to October 3, 2004.

Horse Race in Iowa Among Likely Voters (599)

	Bush	Kerry	Nader	Badnarik	Don't Know/ Other
Two-person Race	47%	48%			5%
Republicans	95%	3%	*	*	2%
Independents	30%	50%	*	*	20%
Democrats	2%	95%	*	*	3%
With Third Parties	46%	47%	4%	0%	3%
Republicans	95%	3%	1%	0%	1%
Independents	24%	47%	12%	0%	17%
Democrats	1%	94%	4%	0%	1%

Third party candidates are not altering the contest in Iowa. Kerry's one-point margin held even after the inclusion of Independent Ralph Nader (who received 4%) and Libertarian Michael Badnarik (who failed to reach 1%). Nader draws a bit more support from Democrats than Republicans but he also hurts Bush a bit more among Independents, allowing Kerry to maintain a 20-point advantage among these swing voters.

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, as immortalized in the phrase "Reagan Democrats").

Impact of the First Presidential Debate

The September 30 debate changed the dynamics of the race. The contest in Iowa shifted from a Bush advantage of six points according to a mid-September Gallup poll to a dead heat in the latest Humphrey Institute survey. The Iowa contest essentially is back to where it was in mid-summer.

Presidential Contest in Iowa

	Bush	Kerry	Nader	Badnarick	Spread
Humphrey Survey (6/21- 7/12/04) 614 Likely Voters Margin of Error +/-4	44%	48%	3%	1%	Kerry +4
CNN/USAT/Gallup (9/16- 9/19/04) 631 Likely Voters Margin of Error +/-5	50%	44%	2%	*	Bush +6
Humphrey Survey (9/27- 10/3/04) 599 Likely Voters Margin of Error +/-4	46%	47%	4%	0%	Kerry +1

Another significant change is that Bush's dominance of the terrorism issue eroded sharply. Bush held a 12-point advantage over Kerry on handling terrorism in the Humphrey Institute survey conducted between June 21 and July 12. Bush's dominance bulged to 23 points just before the September 30 debate. After the debate, the President maintained an edge, but his command of the issue sharply declined to an eight-point advantage.

Whether Bush or Kerry Do a Better Job Handling Terrorism

	Bush	Kerry	Bush's Margin of Advantage
Summer Survey (6/21-7/12/04)	52%	40%	12 points
Pre-debate (9/27- 9/29/04)	58%	35%	23 points
Post-debate (10/1- 10/3/04)	49%	41%	8 points

Damage to Kerry in August

The Humphrey Institute's summer and fall surveys document the erosion of Kerry's standing on a number of issues in the wake of the Republicans' attacks in August. (In these areas, the debate produced little clear improvement for Kerry.) When asked which candidate would do a better job on the economy, Kerry's 13-point advantage during the summer had declined to three points by the end of September. The slide in Kerry's advantage on the economy is particularly telling given the growing pessimism of Iowans regarding the national economy: the proportion of voters who reported that the nation's economy had gotten worse rose 12 points, from 32% in the summer to 44% in the fall (29% indicated that the economy had gotten better, while 26% said it stayed the same).

Kerry's 16-point bulge on education in the summer decreased to three points in the fall; his 27-point lead on health care slid to ten points; his 22-point margin on Medicare and its drug benefit fell to 14; and his 14-point advantage on gay marriage was reversed into a nine-point Bush edge. Bush's slender two-point edge on the situation in Iraq rose to 10 points.

Erosion of Kerry's Ratings on Handling Issues

	Bush	Kerry	Spread
ECONOMY			
Summer Survey (6/21- 7/12/04)	42%	55%	Kerry +13
Fall Survey (9/27- 10/3/04)	46%	49%	Kerry +3
EDUCATION			
Summer Survey (6/21- 7/12/04)	39%	55%	Kerry +16
Fall Survey (9/27- 10/3/04)	45%	48%	Kerry +3
HEALTH CARE			
Summer Survey (6/21- 7/12/04)	33%	60%	Kerry +27
Fall Survey (9/27- 10/3/04)	41%	51%	Kerry +10
MEDICARE AND DRUGS			
Summer Survey (6/21- 7/12/04)	35%	57%	Kerry +22
Fall Survey (9/27- 10/3/04)	38%	52%	Kerry +14
GAY MARRIAGE			
Summer Survey (6/21- 7/12/04)	36%	50%	Kerry +14
Fall Survey (9/27- 10/3/04)	44%	35%	Bush +9
SITUATION IN IRAQ			
Summer Survey (6/21- 7/12/04)	49%	47%	Bush +2
Fall Survey (9/27- 10/3/04)	52%	42%	Bush +10

The slide in Kerry's political standing among Iowa voters also was evident in their weaker evaluations of the Democrat's personality characteristics. Following the Republicans' intensified criticisms of Kerry for "flip flopping," there was a 13-point rise in Iowan voters who assigned this label to Kerry instead of Bush. Kerry's advantage as the candidate who "cared" more about voters also suffered from the August attacks: the Democrat's 12-point advantage over Bush on "caring" shrank to four points by the fall.

Weaker Evaluations of Kerry's Personality Traits

	Bush	Kerry	Spread
FLIP FLOP			
Summer Survey (6/21- 7/12/04)	35%	51%	Kerry +16
Fall Survey (9/27- 10/3/04)	28%	57%	Kerry +29
CARES			
Summer Survey (6/21- 7/12/04)	41%	53%	Kerry +12
Fall Survey (9/27- 10/3/04)	45%	49%	Kerry +4
STRONG LEADER			
Summer Survey (6/21- 7/12/04)	48%	49%	Kerry +1
Fall Survey (9/27- 10/3/04)	49%	46%	Bush +3
STUBBORN			
Summer Survey (6/21- 7/12/04)	69%	15%	Bush +54
Fall Survey (9/27- 10/3/04)	65%	19%	Bush +46

National Security Preoccupies Voters

National security issues have risen in importance in the eyes of likely voters in Iowa. The proportion of voters who identified Iraq and terrorism as the single most important issue in the 2004 presidential election rose from a combined 32% during the summer to 41% in the fall. Meanwhile, health care and the economy declined as the top issues from 39% to 32%.

Single Most Important Issue in Presidential Vote

	Summer Survey (6/21- 7/12/04)	Fall Survey (9/27- 10/3/04)
Economy	27%	23%
Iraq	20%	24%
Health Care	12%	9%
Terrorism	12%	17%
Education	8%	5%
Medicare	8%	8%
Gay Marriage	7%	5%
Other	5%	5%
Don't Know	2%	4%

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 likely Iowa voters 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.

President's Approval Rating

	Approve	Disapprove	Don't Know/ Other
Summer Survey (6/21- 7/12/04)	50%	49%	1%
Fall Survey (9/27- 10/3/04)	53%	46%	1%

Gender Gap Favors Kerry

Women continue to favor Kerry over Bush by a dozen points (54% versus 42%) among likely voters. The Kerry advantage in the fall Humphrey Institute Survey parallels his 11-point lead in its summer poll of likely Iowa voters.

Gender Gap among Likely Voters

	Bush	Kerry	Don't Know/ Other
Male	53%	41%	6%
Female	42%	54%	3%

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.

The research team was Lawrence R. Jacobs (director) and Joanne M. Miller. Dean J. Brian Atwood has provided unstinting support and encouragement for which we are grateful. Cindy Orbovich and Julie C. Lund generously provided valuable advice and contributions in preparing and distributing the report. Melanie Burns provided superior research assistance. Jacobs and Miller are responsible for designing and analyzing the survey. 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 812 adults in Iowa between September 27 and October 3, 2004. Of these, 599 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	44%
Independent	14%
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.