



THE PEW RESEARCH CENTER
For The People & The Press

COMMENTARY

1615 L Street, N.W., Suite 700
Washington, D.C. 20036
Tel (202) 419-4350
Fax (202) 419-4399

For Immediate Release: December 27, 2005

For Further Information:

Andrew Kohut, Director
Jodie T. Allen, Senior Editor
Scott Keeter, Director of Survey Research
Carroll Doherty and Michael Dimock, Associate Directors

What Was—and Wasn't on the Public's Mind...
AND HOW OPINIONS CHANGED DURING 2005

Public opinion played a major role in the most important news stories of the year, from President Bush's battle with an increasingly restive opposition, to the public's mounting anxiety about the war in Iraq, to the sharp public rebuke of Congress for its intervention in the Terry Schiavo affair. Many of the strongest trends in public opinion in 2005 carried over from previous years. On some issues, notably presidential popularity and the Iraq war, attitudinal trends strengthened even as public attention to related news subsided from previous highs. In other cases, notably the disastrous Gulf Coast hurricanes, events evoked intense public interest while also feeding into an undercurrent of shifting opinion about national priorities.

In a couple of instances—congressional intervention in the Schiavo feeding tube controversy and President Bush's campaign for his Social Security initiative—the trend in public opinion ran strongly counter to the intended effect. And other strong opinion currents—growing isolationist sentiment, persistent economic anxiety and rising disillusionment with the federal government—were not tied to any single news event.

There were also notable non-trend news stories. These include such happenings as bird flu outbreaks and the international outcry over U.S. torture policies where, despite headline coverage, the public was unmoved.

Finally there are those stories that attracted the most public attention. Many of these—Katrina, gas prices, events in Iraq, for example—also make the top trends list. Others such as the Indian Ocean tsunami, the Vioxx recall, were more in the nature of one time happenings.

To capture these divergent measures, the Pew Research Center has compiled three separate lists: the top ten *trends* in public opinion, the top five “*non-barking dogs*,” and the traditional *Year-End News Interest Index* listing the stories most closing watched by the public over the course of 2005.

Top Ten Public Opinion Trends of 2005

1. Presidential Popularity Plunge – Starting his second term with less [popular support](#) than other recent re-elected incumbents, President George W. Bush's saw his approval ratings further erode under pressure from public opposition to his foreign and domestic policies and new focus on alleged ethical lapses in his administration. In November, Bush's approval rating hit new lows, just [36% of the public](#) thought he had lived up to his campaign pledge to restore integrity to the White House, and for the first time as many approved as disapproved of his [handling of terrorism](#). By December, upbeat economic reports, apparently successful elections in Iraq and a series of high-profile speeches shored up the president's approval rating in some major polls although not in others. However, a Fox News/Opinion Dynamics poll found that by a 47%-38% margin, the public judged that this year the president would make Santa's "naughty," rather than "nice" list, up from 40% who thought so a year ago and 31% in 2003.

2. Hurricane Blowback – Most Americans gave the federal government a failing grade on its handling of [Hurricane Katrina's](#) aftermath. But the crisis revealed a sharp racial divide, with two-thirds of blacks saying the government's response would have been faster had most victims been white; only 17% of whites agreed. A [month later](#), while a growing number saw the nation increasingly divided between "haves" and "have nots," as many Americans worried that the government would spend too much on hurricane relief as feared that it would spend too little.

3. Iraq Disillusionment – Following a small [post-election bounce](#), public approval of the president's handling of the situation in Iraq resumed its downward drift, hitting a low of [37%](#) in October. But opinions on Iraq remain volatile: Americans are nearly evenly divided on whether the decision to use military force was [right or wrong](#), and more than half think it possible that the U.S. can establish a [stable democracy](#) in Iraq. In the wake of Democratic congressman's John Murtha's high-profile call for a withdrawal plan and a series of presidential speeches in rebuttal, Bush's approval rating on Iraq remained mired in the [mid-thirties](#).

4. Pump Shock and Economy Anxiety – Even before hurricanes in the Gulf added momentum to already rising gas prices, the public remained apprehensive about the economy. [In May](#), only 44% of Americans rated their personal financial situation good or excellent, down from 51% in January; only 35% approved of the president's handling of the economy. In Katrina's wake, fully 71% of the public (the most in two decades) reported following news about [gas prices](#) very closely. As prices receded and economic reports re-brightened in [December](#), prices at the pump were still closely watched by 61% of the public and 40% of Americans said they were finding it hard to make ends meet.

5. Inward Turn – [Isolationist sentiment](#) was on the upswing, with more than four-in-ten among the public saying America should “mind its own business internationally”—on par with numbers expressing that view after the closing of the Vietnam War and the Cold War. Two-thirds of Americans say the country is less respected globally; most blame the Iraq war for that result.

6. Domestic Issues Ascendant – While terrorism still ranked high among the public’s concerns, domestic priorities rose in prominence in the public mind. At the [start of 2005](#) Americans already disagreed with White House priorities—tax cuts, tax simplification, tort reform—ranking Social Security, health care, aid to the poor and the budget deficit more important. By October, half of the public said Bush should give [domestic issues](#) priority over the war on terrorism and a large majority (69%) said the next president should offer [different policies](#).

7. Schiavo Backlash – Public opinion delivered a surprise verdict on a bill rushed into law by Congress in March that would have required federal courts to intervene in a state court decision allowing removal of a feeding tube from a long-comatose Florida woman. [Initial reaction](#) was highly negative and four months later, three quarters of the public still felt that Congress should have stayed out of the case, a view essentially unchanged late in the year.

8. Evolution Devolution – As proponents of “intelligent design” pressed to have their theory more widely taught, many in the media and in the public as well were surprised to find that a majority of Americans rejected natural selection and other tenets of the theory of [evolution](#). Not surprised were trend trackers, who had long noted that most Americans were dubious of Darwin.

9. Social Security Misstep – Despite a nationwide push, President Bush’s plan to allow individuals to divert part of their payroll taxes to private accounts stumbled. While 70% of the public signaled support for private Social Security accounts in [the fall of 2000](#) and nearly 60% in the fall of [2004](#), by [May 2005](#) fewer than half (47%) did so, and only 3-in-10 Americans approved of Bush’s handling of Social Security.

10. Feds Out of Favor – Both the legislative and executive branches of the federal government took a beating in the public eye. Congress continued its downward slide with only 45% of the public holding at least a somewhat favorable view of the body by [mid-October](#), including a mere 7% who declared a “very” favorable opinion. Overall the federal government scored no better: Its favorability rating fell from a high of 73% as recently as April 2003 to 46% in [December](#).

Non-Barking Dogs of 2005: *Headline Stories the Public Took in Stride*

1. No Pandemic Panic – Despite warnings by public health officials and disease control experts, the public failed to register much alarm about the possible spread of avian flu. Few among the U.S. public paid very close attention to outbreaks of the disease in Asia and Europe; in [November](#), six-in-ten expressed either limited or no concern that a family member might be exposed to it.

2. No Partisan Bounce – While Republicans suffer their lowest approval ratings in many years, (in [October](#), only 42% of the public held even a mostly favorable view of the party), the Democrats scarcely capitalized on the GOP's discomfort, racking up only a 49% favorability score that same month.

3. No Bombing Backlash – Although the July 7 terrorist bombings in London drew considerable public attention and heightened fears of another attack on the U.S., these fears did not translate into less positive views of either Muslims or Islam. [Polling](#) during and after the attacks found a majority (55%) of Americans expressing a favorable opinion of Muslim-Americans, more than did so prior to the 9/11 terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center and Pentagon.

4. No Turn on Torture – Despite international outcry over allegations that the U.S. tortured or condoned the torture of terrorist suspects, [only a third](#) (32%) of the public expressed the view that the use of torture is never justified (although another 17% saw its use as rarely justified)—essentially the same proportions holding these views as in July 2004.

5. No Media Meltdown – The credibility of both TV and print press came in for criticism on several fronts and perceptions of political bias in the media continued to rise. But, by wide margins, the U.S. public still gave [more favorable](#) than unfavorable ratings to their daily newspaper (80%-20%), local and cable TV news (79%-21%) and network TV news (75%-25%).

2005 Year-End News Interest Index

Public interest remained highly focused on a few stories in 2005, with disasters—both natural and man-made—high gas prices and the situation in Iraq claiming top attention over much of the year.

Hurricanes Katrina and Rita led the list of this year's top news interest stories, claiming the very close attention of nearly three-in-four (73%) in October—a considerably higher rating than was received by any news story in the past three years. Interest in the back-to-back storms not only matched the previous two-decade record for a natural disaster, the 1989 San Francisco earthquake, but came close to matching the attention accorded the 9/11 terrorist attacks (74%). However, the 1986 Challenger disaster still holds the long-term news interest record, having been followed closely by 80% of the public.

Following close behind Katrina and Rita were prices at the gasoline pump, with 71% of Americans tracking their progress very closely. A related story, the large profits reported by oil companies, drew intense interest among 37% of the public in November. While gas prices topped the news interest list in 2004, and took second place in 2003, in those years public interest peaked at only 64% and 53% respectively. The condition of the U.S. economy was also of recurring intense interest, peaking at 35% at the year's end.

Apart from continuing attention to the situation in Iraq, only two foreign-based stories attracted high interest among the U.S. public; both were disaster related. The dramatic aftermath of the Indian Ocean tsunami, which occurred shortly before the start of the year, was followed very closely by 58% of the public in January. The terrorist bombings in London in July also drew substantial interest with about half of the public (48%) tracking the story with great interest, on par with peak public interest in the situation in Iraq.

Top News Interest Stories of 2005

Story...	Very Closely %
1. Hurricanes Katrina and Rita Impacts (<i>Oct.</i>)*	73
2. High gasoline prices (<i>Sept.</i>)*	71
3. Tsunami in Indian Ocean (<i>Jan.</i>)	58
4. Terrorist bombings in London (<i>July</i>)	48
5. News about situation in Iraq (<i>Jan.</i>)*	48
6. President Bush's Social Security Plan (<i>Mar.</i>)*	38
7. Oil companies reporting large profits (<i>Nov.</i>)	37
8. Condition of the U.S. economy (<i>Dec.</i>)*	35
9. Hurricane Wilma Impact on Mexico and Florida (<i>Nov.</i>)	34
10. Safety concerns over Vioxx painkillers (<i>Jan.</i>)	29
11. John Roberts confirmation as Supreme Court Chief Justice (<i>Oct.</i>)	28
12. Recent Iraq election (<i>Feb.</i>)	27
13. Changes to Medicare drug coverage (<i>Dec.</i>)	25
14. Death of Rosa Parks (<i>Nov.</i>)	25
15. Indictment of Scooter Libby (<i>Nov.</i>)	24

* Interest in these stories was tracked over many months – highest (or, in case of ties among months, most recent) reported interest shown here.

Iraq continued to draw the very close attention of upwards of 40% of the public throughout the year, although this level of attention to the war never reached its peak levels of 54% in October 2004 and 63% in May 2003.

In a possible indication of disaster fatigue among Americans, Hurricane Wilma's wallop to Mexico and Florida, garnered sharp interest among only 34% of the public. And news about the devastating earthquake in Pakistan in October was closely tracked by only 22%, as were reports of the outbreak of bird flu in Asia and Europe.

President George W. Bush's plan to introduce private accounts into the Social Security was very closely watched by 38% in March, as the president traveled the country to pitch his plan to the public, while his soon-to-start Medicare drug coverage plan elicited the close attention of one-in-four. A quarter of the population also closely followed the death of civil rights heroine Rosa Parks, while about an equal number focused on the indictment of top White House aide Scooter Libby.