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Confidence In GOP Is At New Low in Poll Democrats Favored To Address Issues

By Richard Morin and Dan Balz

Public confidence in GOP governance has plunged to the lowest levels of the Bush presidency, with Americans saying by wide margins that they now trust Democrats more than Republicans to deal with Iraq, the economy, immigration and other issues, according to a Washington Post-ABC News poll that underscores the GOP's fragile grip on power six months before the midterm elections.

Dissatisfaction with the administration's policies in Iraq has overwhelmed other issues as the source of problems for President Bush and the Republicans. The survey suggests that pessimism about the direction of the country -- 69 percent said the nation is now off track -- and disaffection with Republicans have dramatically improved Democrats' chances to make gains in November.

Democrats are now favored to handle all 10 issues measured in the Post-ABC News poll. The survey shows a majority of the public, 56 percent, saying they would prefer to see Democrats in control of Congress after the elections.

The poll offers two cautions for the Democrats, however. One is a growing disaffection with incumbents generally. When asked whether they were inclined to reelect their current representative to Congress or look around for someone new, 55 percent said they were open to someone else, the highest since just before Republicans captured control of Congress in 1994. That suggests that some Democratic incumbents could feel the voters' wrath, although as the party in power Republicans have more at risk.

The second warning for Democrats is that their improved prospects for November appear driven primarily by dissatisfaction with Republicans rather than by positive impressions of their own party. Congressional Democrats are rating only slightly more favorably than congressional Republicans, and 52 percent of those surveyed said the Democrats have not offered a sharp contrast to Bush and the Republicans.

Only a third wants the GOP to remain in the majority in Congress. Nearly three times as many Americans say they will use the elections to express opposition to the president (30 percent) than to show support for him (12 percent).

The public mood indicates that the midterm elections are likely to be a referendum on the president and his party. The poll suggests that, if Republicans can turn the election into a choice between the two parties, as they are attempting to do, they could frustrate Democratic hopes of capturing control of one or both houses of Congress. Some Democratic leaders already are warning against overconfidence, given how quickly conditions could change by November.

Bush's job approval rating now stands at 33 percent, down five percentage points in barely a month and a new low for him in Post-ABC polls. His current standing with the public is identical to President George H.W. Bush's worst showing in the Post-ABC poll before he lost his reelection bid

to Bill Clinton in 1992. Bush's father fell below 30 percent in some other independent polls that year.

The current president's decline has been particularly steep among Republicans, who until last month had remained generally loyal while independents and Democrats grew increasingly critical. According to the survey, Bush's disapproval rating among Republicans has nearly doubled in the past month, from 16 percent to 30 percent, while his approval rating dipped below 70 percent for the first time. Nearly nine in 10 Democrats and seven in 10 independents do not like the job Bush is doing as president.

Public dissatisfaction with Bush has grown in lock step with opposition to the conflict in Iraq. Not quite a third -- 32 percent -- said they approve of the way Bush is handling Iraq, down five points in the past month and a new low in Post-ABC polling. Fewer than four in 10 -- 37 percent -- say Iraq has been worth the cost, the lowest level of support recorded in Post-ABC polls. Nearly two in three Americans believe the war has not been worth it -- a view shared by eight in 10 Democrats, seven in 10 independents and a third of all Republicans.

The clearest sign of how Iraq dominates the public mood came in answer to another question, which asked those who disapprove of Bush's performance to cite a reason. Nearly half, 46 percent, said Iraq -- easily the most frequently mentioned reason. In equal proportions, Republicans as well as Democrats who disapprove of Bush cite his performance in Iraq as the principal reason.

The findings buttress comments Monday by White House Deputy Chief of Staff Karl Rove, who said Iraq "looms over everything," although he said he remains confident about Republican prospects in November.

Bush's fading popularity is matched by waning popular support for the Republican-held Congress. A third of the country approves of the job Congress is doing -- identical to the president's poor job performance rating -- and a 10-year low. Even Republicans are divided over the performance of the Republican-controlled Congress: 49 percent approved while 47 disapproved, a view shared by seven in 10 Democrats and political independents.

The survey suggests that dissatisfaction with Congress extends to members of both parties. Only 39 percent approve of the job Democrats in Congress are doing, while 58 percent disapprove -- slightly higher than the level of disapproval registered before the 1994 midterm elections, when Republicans evicted Democrats from power on Capitol Hill.

On one other measure, incumbents look slightly less threatened. More than three in five, 62 percent, said they approve of the way their own representative is doing his or her job, up from 59 percent last month. At this point in 1994, an equal percentage gave good ratings to their representatives, but by October that number had plunged to 49 percent.

A total of 1,103 randomly selected adults were interviewed by telephone May 11-15. Margin of sampling error is plus or minus three percentage points.

Democrats hold an advantage of 52 percent to 40 percent when voters are asked whether they plan to vote for the Republican or Democratic candidate in their House district, a margin that didn't narrow when the preferences of only those most likely to cast ballots were analyzed. That 12-point Democratic margin is slightly smaller than in several previous polls.

The survey also found Democrats had a double-digit lead over Republicans on nine of the 10 issues when respondents were asked which party they favored to deal with the problem and a smaller lead on the 10th.

By 2 to 1 or better, the public preferred Democrats to handle gas prices and health care. And by double-digit margins, they preferred Democrats to deal with education (23 percentage points), the budget (20 points), the economy (18 points) and protecting privacy (15 points). Democrats also had a 14-point edge on handling Iraq, immigration and taxes.

Only on terrorism did Republicans come close -- though, by 46 to 41 percent, the public still preferred the Democrats.

The economy, followed by Iraq and immigration, leads a long and wide-ranging list of issues that voters say are most important to them at the ballot box this year. Among those who say the economy is their top issue -- about 17 percent of the public -- 56 percent say they will vote for the Democratic candidate in House races. Eleven percent named Iraq as their priority, and 79 percent of these plan to vote Democratic.

On one issue, Americans were less pessimistic than a month ago. In April, 70 percent said higher gasoline prices were causing financial hardship. In the latest poll, 57 percent said that was the case.

Assistant polling director Claudia Deane contributed to this report.