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PRESIDENTIAL RACE IN EARLY SPRING

by G. Donald Ferree, Jr.

Wisconsin was one of the states which was very close in the 2000 election (when Gore beat Bush by about 5000 votes)and it is often labeled a battleground state this year in political coverage. This reputation appears warranted in the the results of the most recent Badger Poll™, which interviewed 500 randomly chosen state residents by telephone between March 23 and 30, and which included direct matchups between the putative Republican and Democratic nominees as well as Nader. Bush and Kerry are close, and while Nader now finds only quite limited support, it could make a difference in a close race in November.

Attention to the campaign continues to be relatively modest. Overall, about one third (32%) say they are paying "a lot" of attention to the candidates running for President this year. Adding in the four in ten (40%) who are paying "some" does account for nearly three residents in four, but still with some seven plus months to go the election day, the race has not yet captured the imagination of state residents. Only about one third of each self-described partisan group is paying a lot of attention, although Democrats are a bit more likely to be watching the candidates at least "some" -- and of course they have had more candidates to watch over the past months.

Even though the major party candidates have now been evident for several weeks, allegiances seem to be rather fluid. When, without prompting, residents were asked who they would most like to see elected President this year, fully three in ten (31%) explicitly said there was no such person and a further 6% declined to name anyone. The major party (presumptive) nominees dominate the field, with Bush being named by three in ten (30%) and Kerry by just under one in five (18%), leaving a scattering of other names.

As would be expected, almost half of self-described Democrats name Kerry, while among Republicans, two thirds name Bush, but roughly three in ten come up with no person. Independents are at least as likely to fail to name anyone at all, and the party nominees together account for under four in ten of this group (25% for Bush, 12% for Kerry).

An important piece of any race involving an incumbent is how his or her job performance is viewed by the potential electorate. Bush's present ratings are neither especially strong nor weak, nor have they changed much of late. Overall, somewhat under half call him either excellent (16%) or good (30%), while somewhat more than half opt for a lower grade of fair (24%) or poor (30%). Complete trends are shown in the accompanying table. Bush's job ratings have been relatively stable of late. There is no more than modest movement upward of

Comparisons from Four Surveys

	MAR	JAN	DEC	OCT
Attention to candidates				
A LOT	32%	20%	13%	8%
SOME	40	44	31	28
ONLY A LITTLE	18	26	35	40
NONE AT ALL	11	11	20	24
Anyone in mind for President				
NO NAME MENTIONED	31%	38%	53%	59%
GEORGE W. BUSH	30	28	27	22
GENERAL WESLEY CLARK	1	3	2	*
FRMR GOV HOWARD DEAN	1	2	3	2
SENATOR JOHN EDWARDS	2	1	*	*
REP. DICK GEPHARDT	--	--	*	--
SENATOR JOHN KERRY	18	8	*	1
REP. DENNIS KUCINICH	1	1	*	*
SENATOR JOE LIEBERMAN	--	*	*	*
CAROL MOSELEY-BRAUN	--	--	--	*
THE REV. AL SHARPTON	--	--	--	--
SENATOR RUSS FEINGOLD	*	--	*	--
SENATOR HERB KOHL	--	--	--	--
GOVERNOR JIM DOYLE	--	--	--	--
GOV. TOMMY THOMPSON	*	--	--	--
TOM BARRETT	--	--	--	*
BILL CLINTON	*	*	1	1
HILLARY CLINTON	*	1	1	1
JOHN MCCAIN	*	--	*	*
ARNOLD SCHWARZENEGGER	--	--	--	1
OTHER	3	1	3	1
"REPUBLICAN"	--	*	*	--
"DEMOCRAT"	1	3	1	2
ANYBODY BUT BUSH	4	4	1	*
COMBINATION	--	1	*	--
DON'T KNOW	5	8	7	7
REFUSED	1	*	*	1

downward, but his March job ratings seem more polarized than was the case in January (BOTH excellent and poor are up, while both good and fair are down).

Overall Presidential Rating
Polls from March 2002 to March 2004

	<-2004->		<----------2003---------->								<---2002---->		
	MAR	JAN	DEC	OCT	AUG	MAY	APR	MAR	FEB	JAN	SPT	JUN	MAR
Overall													
Exc	16%	11%	17%	15%	14%	27%	31%	18%	19%	16%	19%	25%	28%
Good	30	37	35	35	38	35	38	35	39	38	45	44	40
Fair	24	28	26	27	28	24	21	30	25	29	23	22	22
Poor	30	22	19	21	19	13	10	16	16	14	12	8	7

While choices seem very much in an early stage of being made, it is not the case that the major party candidates are ciphers, rather that opinion on them is torn. Overall, more than nine in ten were willing to come down as having either a favorable (52%) or unfavorable (41%) view of the President. Comparable figures for Kerry (37% favorable, 34% unfavorable) show that seven in ten have a basic impression, but views are roughly evenly split among state residents overall.

Bush is familiar (at least to the extent that people are able and willing to state an overall impression) to over nine in ten people describing themselves as either Republicans or Democrats. Among Independents, the comparable figure is only slightly lower at just under nine in ten. The balance of views, however, is strongly associated with partisan stance. Republicans come close to unanimously having a favorable view of Bush. Among Democrats, unfavorable impressions predominate by more than four to one. Independents closely divide, with a slight edge for unfavorable views.

Kerry is best known among his fellow Democrats, nearly seven in eight of whom have an impression of him one way or the other. Familiarity drops off to around three in four among GOP adherents, and two thirds among the unaffiliated. Republicans tend clearly to view him unfavorably (although not quite so onesidedly as Democrats take a positive view). Among the crucial group of Independents, the balance of views is close, but narrowly positive. This means that Kerry is both somewhat less well known among all groups and that views of him are somewhat less strongly colored by one's self-described partisanship.

Awareness of Candidates

	MAR	JAN	DEC	OCT
George W. Bush				
FAVORABLE	52%	54%	57%	60%
UNFAVORABLE	41	39	34	34
John Kerry				
FAVORABLE	37%	42%	17%	15%
UNFAVORABLE	34	18	23	16

Impressions of Bush have not moved very much, though if there is a trend, it is to somewhat more evenly divided perceptions, but the lack of movement is more noticeable than any clear shift. After becoming remarkably more positive from December to January, views of Kerry have receded, as the campaign has been joined to a relatively even split reminiscent of the overall figures (with a lower degree of familiarity) to Bush.

This campaign so far has been noteworthy by how fast the major party nominees have been settled, partly a result of the front-loading of primaries on the calendar and partly the fact that -- after much speculation about Dean's inevitability before any ballots had been cast among the then-crowded Democratic field, the speed with which one candidate became dominant, winning all but a handful of primaries and so effectively putting an end to the race by mid-February, even if he had not then clinched the nomination mathematically.

When respondents were reminded of the likely (all but certain) roster on the ballot of Bush, Kerry, and Ralph Nader, and asked and asked "as of now, which one, if any do you plan to vote for", Bush narrowly (42%-36%) edges Kerry, with Nader garnering a handful of supporters (3%). This result is close to the edge of "statistical significance", meaning that while more residents probably incline to Bush rather than Kerry, one's confidence that this reflects a real edge in the population must be limited.

Among both partisan camps, intentions at this stage are quite onesided, with Bush having 86% among Republicans and Kerry 81% among Democrats. Independents, tellingly, split almost evenly. and this is the only group among whom Nader's support at this stage is more than trivial.

Those who expressed no preference among the three were asked in a followup question, "if you had to make up your mind among these three, as of now, who would you prefer". Overall, each major party nominee picks up around 5% (Bush just over, Kerry just under) and Nader garners an additional 2%. This means that seven months before the election, nine in ten Democrats and almost all Republicans have at least a "leaning" preference. Independents are almost as likely to have such a tentative inclination, and are the only group among whom Nader seems to have some real appeal, with about one in six saying they either plan to vote for him, or would prefer him if they had to make up their minds. (Results of these two questions are summarized below in a "constructed item", combining preferences, which yield Bush 47%, Kerry 41%, Nader 5%. Men give Bush about a ten point edge, women come close to splitting evenly. Age groups are broadly similar, with those from thirty to forty-four providing the most positive field for the President.

This suggests that, at this early stage, as the candidates are just really beginning to confront one another directly, Wisconsin is very much up for grabs. It also suggests that Nader's role could be important here -- although one must caution that third party candidates often look more promising early on, with preferences focusing more on the major party contenders as time goes by. Still, Nader's "support" is about equal to the difference between Bush and Kerry. Those who had not indicated, either in the original or "pushed" choice question, either the Republican or Democratic candidate, to "suppose you were choosing just between Bush and Kerry". Overall, Kerry gains a bit more than Bush, so that looking just at preferences in a twoway race, the gap between the two comes closer to disappearing: Bush 49%, Kerry 45%.

A final indicator of the fact that things appear quite open in the Badger state at this stage comes from the question, often asked of incumbents, "as of now, do you think you would like to see President Bush re-elected in 2004, or would you rather see someone else in the White House?" This is not exactly a vote preference measure at this stage but does tap the important question of whether an incumbent is seen as doing a good enough job to deserve another term, or there are enough doubts for voters to look seriously at alternatives. Overall, just under half (45%) say they would like to see Bush re-elected. Half (50%) would prefer SOME alternative. As noted, this is no guarantee of ultimate vote -- a campaign can create doubts or confidence in an incumbent and make a huge difference in whether a particular alternative is seen as an improvement -- but it does reinforce the view of the electorate as closely divided as the campaign just begins to heat up.

Opinion has been continuously split on re-electing Bush, never moving very far away from an even division, the present reading is -- if anything modestly up from January, but not materially different.

Inclination to Give Bush Another Term

	03/04	01/04	12/03	10/03	8/03	5/03
Basic stance on Bush						
LIKE BUSH RE-ELECTED	45%	42%	46%	46%	43%	53%
LIKE SOMEONE ELSE	50	49%	47	45	50	42

Statewide Marginals and Percentages for Key Groups

What follows is the exact question wording for each of the items referred to in the release. All results shown are for the basic sample of state residents. The first column is the percentage of the entire sample giving each response. The second and third reports the percentages for men and women separately. The fourth, fifth, and sixth columns show self-described Democrats, Independents, and Republicans. Columns seven through ten group respondents by age.

Q01. INTERVIEWER: (DO NOT ASK) Enter respondent's gender

		GENDER		PARTISANSHIP			AGE IN YEARS			
	TOT	M	F	DEM	IND	REP	<30	<45	<60	60+
MALE	49%	100%	--%	37%	60%	47%	45%	54%	52%	44%
FEMALE	51	--	100	63	40	53	55	46	48	56

VOTE01. Up to now, how much attention have you paid to the candidates running for President in 2004? A lot, some, only a little, or none at all?

		GENDER		PARTISANSHIP			AGE IN YEARS			
	TOT	M	F	DEM	IND	REP	<30	<45	<60	60+
A LOT	32%	31%	32%	36%	36%	32%	8%	19%	33%	56%
SOME	40	42	38	47	38	40	50	44	41	29
ONLY A LITTLE	18	20	17	14	12	20	27	22	19	7
NONE AT ALL	11	8	13	3	14	7	14	15	8	8
DON'T KNOW	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--
REFUSED	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--

VOTE02. Is there any person you would especially like to see elected President this year?

		GENDER		PARTISANSHIP			AGE IN YEARS			
	TOT	M	F	DEM	IND	REP	<30	<45	<60	60+
NO NAME MENTIONED	31%	31%	31%	22%	34%	25%	49%	39%	32%	14%
GEORGE W. BUSH	30	33	28	3	25	66	17	28	30	41
GENERAL WESLEY CLARK	1	--	1	3	--	--	4	1	--	--
FRMR GOV HOWARD DEAN	1	1	1	1	3	--	3	--	1	1
SENATOR JOHN EDWARDS	2	2	2	3	4	*	3	2	2	3
REP. DICK GEPHARDT	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--
SENATOR JOHN KERRY	18	17	20	48	12	2	14	18	16	25
REP. DENNIS KUCINICH	1	1	1	2	2	--	--	1	3	--
SENATOR JOE LIEBERMAN	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--
CAROL MOSELEY-BRAUN	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--
THE REV. AL SHARPTON	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--
SENATOR RUSS FEINGOLD	*	--	*	1	--	--	--	1	--	--
SENATOR HERB KOHL	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--
GOVERNOR JIM DOYLE	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--
GOV. TOMMY THOMPSON	*	1	--	--	--	1	--	--	--	1
TOM BARRETT	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--
BILL CLINTON	*	--	*	--	*	--	--	*	--	--
HILLARY CLINTON	*	1	*	1	--	--	--	*	--	1
JOHN MCCAIN	*	1	*	--	1	*	2	--	--	*
ARNOLD SCHWARZENEGGER	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--
OTHER (SPECIFY)	3	4	2	2	4	2	4	4	3	2
"REPUBLICAN"	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--
"DEMOCRAT"	1	1	1	2	1	--	--	--	*	2
ANYBODY BUT BUSH	4	5	3	4	7	--	4	1	6	3
COMBINATION (SPECIFY)	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--
DON'T KNOW	5	3	6	6	5	3	--	5	5	6
REFUSED	1	1	2	3	2	*	--	--	2	1

VOTE03. I'm going to read you a list of people in public life. For each of them, please tell me if you have a favorable impression of them, an unfavorable impression, or don't know enough to make up your mind. George W. Bush

		GENDER		PARTISANSHIP			AGE IN YEARS			
	TOT	M	F	DEM	IND	REP	<30	<45	<60	60+
FAVORABLE	52%	55%	49%	18%	42%	94%	50%	50%	55%	51%
UNFAVORABLE	41	37	44	77	47	5	41	37	41	43
DON'T KNOW ENOUGH	7	6	7	5	10	*	9	12	4	4
DON'T KNOW	1	2	--	1	1	1	--	1	--	2
REFUSED	*	--	*	--	*	--	--	--	*	--

VOTE12. John Kerry (PROMPT FOR CATEGORIES AS NECESSARY)

		GENDER		PARTISANSHIP			AGE IN YEARS			
	TOT	M	F	DEM	IND	REP	<30	<45	<60	60+
FAVORABLE	37%	37%	37%	75%	38%	10%	34%	33%	38%	42%
UNFAVORABLE	34	33	34	9	30	66	27	27	35	42
DON'T KNOW ENOUGH	28	29	28	15	32	24	38	39	25	16
DON'T KNOW	1	1	1	--	--	1	1	1	1	--
REFUSED	*	--	*	--	*	--	--	--	*	--

VOTE24. This November, the ballot for President will probably be George W. Bush as a Republican, John Kerry as a Democrat, and Ralph Nader as an Independent. As of now, which one, if any, do you plan to vote for?

		GENDER		PARTISANSHIP			AGE IN YEARS			
	TOT	M	F	DEM	IND	REP	<30	<45	<60	60+
GEORGE W. BUSH	42%	46%	39%	4%	35%	86%	41%	43%	41%	44%
JOHN KERRY	36	36	37	81	33	3	38	32	36	40
RALPH NADER	3	4	3	1	10	1	7	6	2	--
NONE OF THEM	4	3	5	1	8	1	5	6	4	2
INSISTS ON "OTHER"	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--
WILL NOT VOTE	2	2	2	3	1	1	2	2	3	*
DON'T KNOW	9	9	10	6	11	7	8	8	11	10
REFUSED	3	2	4	4	3	1	--	3	3	4

VOTE25. (IF DID NOT NAME ONE OF THREE) If you had to make up your mind among these three, as of now who would you prefer?

		GENDER		PARTISANSHIP			AGE IN YEARS			
	TOT	M	F	DEM	IND	REP	<30	<45	<60	60+
NOT ASKED	82%	85%	79%	86%	78%	90%	86%	82%	80%	84%
GEORGE W. BUSH	5	5	5	4	2	7	5	6	6	4
JOHN KERRY	4	4	4	4	6	--	2	2	7	3
RALPH NADER	2	1	2	1	3	1	1	3	1	2
NONE OF THEM	1	1	1	--	4	--	2	2	1	1
INSISTS ON "OTHER"	*	--	1	--	1	--	3	--	--	--
DON'T KNOW	4	2	5	1	2	2	1	4	4	3
REFUSED	2	1	3	3	3	*	--	*	2	3

VOTE26. (UNLESS NAMED BUSH/KERRY IN VOTE24. OR VOTE25.) Suppose you were choosing just between Bush and Kerry? Which would you prefer?

		GENDER		PARTISANSHIP			AGE IN YEARS			
	TOT	M	F	DEM	IND	REP	<30	<45	<60	60+
NOT ASKED	88%	91%	85%	94%	77%	96%	87%	83%	90%	91%
GEORGE W. BUSH	2	2	1	--	5	1	--	4	--	3
JOHN KERRY	5	2	8	3	8	1	6	8	5	1
NONE OF THEM	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--
INSISTS ON "OTHER"	2	2	2	1	6	--	7	2	1	1
DON'T KNOW	2	2	2	*	2	2	--	2	3	3
REFUSED	1	1	1	3	2	*	--	1	2	2

PUSH3WAY. (CONSTRUCTED ITEM FROM VOTE24, VOTE25) ADDING IN LEANERS Preference "if you had to make up your mind"

		GENDER		PARTISANSHIP			AGE IN YEARS			
	TOT	M	F	DEM	IND	REP	<30	<45	<60	60+
GEORGE W. BUSH	47%	51%	44%	8%	37%	93%	47%	49%	47%	48%
JOHN KERRY	41	40	41	85	39	3	40	34	43	43
RALPH NADER	5	5	5	2	13	1	8	9	3	2
NONE OF THEM	1	1	1	--	4	--	2	2	1	1
INSISTS ON "OTHER"	*	--	1	--	1	--	3	--	--	--
DON'T KNOW	4	2	5	1	2	2	1	4	4	3
REFUSED	2	1	3	3	3	*	--	*	2	3

PUSH2WAY. (CONSTRUCTED ITEM, COMBINING VOTE24-25) Choice between Bush and Kerry

		GENDER		PARTISANSHIP			AGE IN YEARS			
	TOT	M	F	DEM	IND	REP	<30	<45	<60	60+
GEORGE W. BUSH	49%	53%	45%	8%	42%	94%	47%	53%	47%	50%
JOHN KERRY	45	42	49	88	48	4	46	42	47	44
NONE OF THEM	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--
INSISTS ON "OTHER"	2	2	2	1	6	--	7	2	1	1
DON'T KNOW	2	2	2	*	2	2	--	2	3	3
REFUSED	1	1	1	3	2	*	--	1	2	2

BUSH06. As of now, do you think you would like to see President Bush reelected in 2004, or would you rather see someone else in the White House?

		GENDER		PARTISANSHIP			AGE IN YEARS			
	TOT	M	F	DEM	IND	REP	<30	<45	<60	60+
LIKE BUSH RE-ELECTED	45%	49%	42%	9%	38%	89%	43%	44%	45%	49%
LIKE SOMEONE ELSE	50	47	52	86	59	7	52	50	51	47
DON'T KNOW	4	3	5	3	3	4	5	6	3	3
REFUSED	1	1	1	2	1	*	--	1	1	1

QD05. Generally speaking, do you consider yourself a Democrat, a Republican, an Independent, or something else?

		GENDER		PARTISANSHIP			AGE IN YEARS			
	TOT	M	F	DEM	IND	REP	<30	<45	<60	60+
DEMOCRAT	27%	21%	34%	100%	--%	--%	20%	27%	27%	32%
REPUBLICAN	30	29	32	--	--	100	32	27	29	33
INDEPENDENT	27	33	21	--	100	--	29	27	26	27
OTHER	11	15	7	--	--	--	9	14	14	4
NONE	3	2	4	--	--	--	4	4	2	2
DON'T KNOW	1	1	2	--	--	--	5	--	1	*
REFUSED	1	--	1	--	--	--	--	1	--	1

QD11. In what year were you born? (ENTER FOUR-DIGIT YEAR) (Calculated and grouped as below)

		GENDER		PARTISANSHIP			AGE IN YEARS			
	TOT	M	F	DEM	IND	REP	<30	<45	<60	60+
18-29	15%	14%	16%	11%	16%	16%	100%	--%	--%	--%
30-44	23	26	21	23	24	21	--	100	--	--
45-59	34	36	31	34	33	33	--	--	100	--
60 and over	26	24	29	31	27	29	--	--	--	100
DK/REFUSED	1	--	3	1	*	2	--	--	--	--

* denotes less than .5%
-- denotes 0%

HOW THE POLL WAS DONE

This BADGER POLL™ was conducted by the University of Wisconsin Survey Center as part of its ongoing program of research designed to benefit the research community and the people of Wisconsin, under the direction of G. Donald Ferree, Jr., Associate Director for Public Opinion Research of the Center. The media sponsors of the survey are the (Madison) Capital Times, and the Milwaukee Journal-Sentinel. The BADGER POLL™ is intended to be a "poll of record" for the state, investigating matters of concern to Wisconsinites including politics, culture, and their daily lives, adhering to the highest standards of polling methodology and rigorous independence.

A total of 500 randomly chosen state residents were interviewed for this survey by telephone between March 23 and 31, inclusive. Telephone numbers were generated by computer in proportion to the number of adults living in each area of the state. Theoretically, results from this survey have a "margin of error" of a little over +/- 4%. This means that, had we asked every eligible resident in Wisconsin, exactly these questions at the time the survey was conducted, there is only a one in twenty chance that the answers would differ by more than that in either direction from what we report here. There could be differences because of changes in question wording, events occurring in the meantime, or any of the practical difficulties involved in taking a scientific survey. Results based on subgroups are subject to a larger "margin of error".

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