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PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION: A SEPTEMBER SNAPSHOT
by G. Donald Ferree, Jr.

President George W. Bush seems to have opened at least a temporary lead in Wisconsin, although there are substantial indications that this represents less a fixed decision than the response to short-term campaign developments.

When reminded of the names of the candidates and asked which, if any they plan to vote for, among Bush, Kerry, and Nader, Bush garners 47% of those who are either registered or have definite plans to register by election day so they can take part. Kerry trails with some 34% among this group, while Nader has the support of 3%.

When respondents were asked "if you had to make up your mind among these three", each of the major party candidates picks up about another 5%, while Nader edges up only slightly, leaving the pushed preference at 52% to 38%, with Nader at 4%. Finally, those who had not placed themselves in either major party camp were asked how they would come down "suppose you were choosing just between Bush and Kerry". That leaves the margin unchanged at 54%-40%.

The key to these results in the short run is that, while partisans tend to back their own candidate, this pattern is stronger among self-described Republicans, who are closer to unanimous than are Democrats, while Independents now give Bush a narrow 49%-42% edge in the twoway forced choice. The overall figures are not much different if one looks only at those who say it is "certain" that they will vote as opposed to that they are certainly or probably will vote.

We have noted earlier that -- if the election were simply a referendum on George W. Bush -- he looks to be in a relatively weaker position than when the issue is whether Kerry would be an improvement. Thus, his (Bush's) job ratings are not especially strong (18% excellent, 33% good, 22% fair, and 26% poor overall). While he is viewed favorably on balance (54% have a generally favorable view of him, contrasted with 38% who have an unfavorable view), these are not absolutely strong numbers.

But the contrast with Kerry is, at least at the moment, evident. He is viewed on balance slightly UNfavorably (48% to 36%). This also means that Wisconsinites are less likely to have a clear impression of the Democratic challenger than of the Republican incumbent.

Three questions attempted to tap into the strength of commitment now being voiced. Three quarters (77%) of those backing Bush say now that they are

"strongly for" their candidate, with just under one in four (22%) saying they support him "not so strongly". Comparable figures for Kerry were six in ten (61%) strongly backing him, and one in three (35%) not so strongly.

The real key is to be found in the next question, when voters were asked whether they were more "FOR your candidate, or more AGAINST the others" -- emphasis in the original question. Two thirds (67%) of Bush backers say they are "FOR" their man, just over one in four (27%) are against the others. Sentiment is much more split over Kerry. Four in ten (42%) say they are mostly for their man, which group is outnumbered by the 52% who say they are against the alternatives. Roughly equivalent majorities (89%) and (84%) of each candidate's backers say they are "pretty sure to vote that way" as opposed to that they "might change your mind between now and the election". Around three in four (77% for Bush, 72% for Kerry) say it makes "a lot" of difference who gets elected President this year". The bulk of the remainder, bringing each coalition to somewhat over nine in ten, says "some".

Bush "wins" the retrospective vote against Gore, doing at least as well (a twenty point lead) than he does in the matchup with Kerry. This questions typically shows a clear advantage for incumbents unless they are wildly unpopular, and the results are consistent with people having had low expectations of Bush in 2000. A majority of Kerry backers say (58%) say they voted for Gore, but this is nowhere as clear a margin as was the case for Bush's adherents.

The fact that this is two very different races (referendum on Bush, choice of him versus a challenger) is further brought home by a question which followed the preference, asking if respondents would "like to see President Bush re-elected in 2004, or would you rather see someone else in the White House". Overall, voters come close to an even split (49% yes, 46% no). While this is a bit clearer among those who say they are absolutely certain to vote (51%-44%), this is still scarcely a ringing endorsement, especially coming after the preference items. Also, the proportion answering this negatively among Kerry backers comes closer to unanimity than is the case among those at least for the present in Bush's column. Clearly, something is causing some of those who might be looking for an alternative not to be confident they have found it in Kerry.

These points are underlined by results from a series of questions asking voters whether various descriptions apply to Bush, Kerry, both or neither. Only one respondent in ten (10%) thinks that NEITHER man "has been unfairly attacking his opponent". One in three (34%) think this description applies to both. Most tellingly, if there is any net advantage, Kerry is at least as likely to be cited for this uniquely as is Bush.

There is also no big distinction on the dimension of being someone who "understands the problems ordinary people face". To be sure, only one in seven think this applies to neither, but there is essentially no advantage for either man: one in three (33%) feel it applies to Bush alone, about as many (29%) believe this describes Kerry by himself, and one in five believe both men have this empathy.

A major weakness is that Bush's promises seem more believable to the Wisconsin public than do Kerry's. Four in ten say that Bush "can be counted on to keep campaign promises" but Kerry can't. Fewer than one in five think that Kerry's promises are uniquely believable. Especially since a challenger must match his promises to the opponent's record, this question shows a real weakness for Kerry. Three in ten think neither man's promises are worth much.

Relatedly, the "flip-flop" charge also seems to be sticking to some extent. Just under half, think that Bush alone "has a consistent record on the issues", contrasted to one in six who find Kerry alone consistent. Tellingly, eight in ten of those backing Bush now say he alone is consistent, twice as high a proportion as that among Kerry's current backers who find HIM especially consistent.

Bush's biggest advantage comes on terror. Who "will protect the United States from terrorism". Half (52%) say this describes Bush alone, only one in seven (15%) feel that way about Kerry. Again this seems to be a bigger drawing card for Bush's backers than for those behind the Massachusetts Senator.

Even on the economy, which in the abstract has been an area of weakness for Bush fails to distinguish the two men at the moment. The proportion saying that Bush "will improve the US economy" alone is essentially identical with the proportion saying that Kerry will but the Chief Executive will not. There is a similar lack of distinction when it comes to "will deal well with the federal budget", with one third of voters saying the statement applies to each man by himself. (Both of these issues seem more central to Kerry supporters, who have a higher proportion saying their candidate alone will deal with these issues than is the case for Bush).

Kerry does have a modest advantage on who "will protect the environment". Overall, just over four in ten say Kerry will do this but Bush won't, while one in four feel Bush will but Kerry will not. Perhaps what is most noteworthy is that this issues fails to cut as cleanly in Kerry's direction as some (notably fighting terror, and being consistent) do for Bush.

The last item in the series asked about how the candidates would do to "make the US more respected in the world". This has been a major theme of the Kerry campaign, but not only are people as likely to see this uniquely describing Bush as to feel it applies only to Kerry, the strength of the issue within the coalitions seems roughly equivalent. That is, the proportion of Bush supporters who think he alone will make us respected is about what the corresponding proportion is for Kerry.

There is plenty of time of these perceptions to change. In particular, the debates will allow voters to draw contrasts directly between the major party alternatives instead of being bombarded by one-sided messages which often talk past one another.

It is also tempting to note that the survey more or less coincided with the controversy over documents used by CBS to criticize Bush's behavior in the National Guard. Strictly speaking, the fact that the documents in the case now seem questionable (to say the least), does not bear on the truth or falsehood of the underlying allegations. But it does play into a perception that Bush is being unfairly attacked, and anything that cuts into the credibility of a challenger (as suggested by the pattern of answers discussed above) makes it much harder for voters who may question his performance to settle for an alternative who must depend on belief that he would have handled many things differently.

The underlying, partially inconsistent dynamics of criticism of an incumbent with great uncertainty about how reliably positively different his challenger would be continues. History has examples where this barrier has been overcome (Reagan in 1980 and Clinton in 1992 come immediately to mind), but this is a task a successful challenger must meet, and at least in mid September in Wisconsin, John Kerry seems not yet to have accomplished.

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

	REGISTERED VOTERS ONLY						PROBABLE VOTERS			
	TOT	M	F	D	I	R	TOT	CRT	GWB	JK
FAVORABLE	54%	56%	53%	15%	47%	93%	55%	55%	91%	9%
UNFAVORABLE	38	38	38	76	45	5	39	40	5	84
DON'T KNOW ENOUGH	5	5	6	8	5	1	4	3	2	6
DON'T KNOW	1	1	2	1	2	--	1	1	*	*
REFUSED	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1

VOTE12. John Kerry (PROMPT FOR CATEGORIES AS NECESSARY)

	REGISTERED VOTERS ONLY						PROBABLE VOTERS			
	TOT	M	F	D	I	R	TOT	CRT	GWB	JK
FAVORABLE	36%	33%	40%	79%	30%	7%	36%	37%	6%	79%
UNFAVORABLE	48	51	45	8	45	85	49	50	83	4
DON'T KNOW ENOUGH	15	15	14	13	24	8	14	12	11	17
DON'T KNOW	1	1	1	--	1	--	*	*	--	1
REFUSED	*	--	1	--	--	--	*	*	--	--

VOTE24. This November, the ballot for President will 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?

	REGISTERED VOTERS ONLY						PROBABLE VOTERS			
	TOT	M	F	D	I	R	TOT	CRT	GWB	JK
GEORGE W. BUSH	47%	51%	44%	6%	36%	91%	48%	50%	89%	--%
JOHN KERRY	34	31	37	79	29	4	35	34	--	86
RALPH NADER	3	4	2	3	7	1	3	3	2	3
NONE OF THEM	4	5	3	1	11	--	3	2	1	4
INSISTS ON "OTHER"	*	--	*	--	--	--	--	--	--	--
WILL NOT VOTE	1	*	2	1	2	--	--	--	--	--
DON'T KNOW	8	7	9	7	14	2	8	8	6	5
REFUSED	3	2	5	3	1	2	3	4	2	2

VOTE25. If you had to make up your mind among these three, as of now who would you prefer?

	REGISTERED VOTERS ONLY						PROBABLE VOTERS			
	TOT	M	F	D	I	R	TOT	CRT	GWB	JK
NOT ASKED	84%	86%	82%	88%	72%	96%	86%	87%	91%	89%
GEORGE W. BUSH	5	4	5	3	9	2	4	3	8	--
JOHN KERRY	4	5	4	4	7	1	4	4	--	9
RALPH NADER	1	1	2	1	4	--	1	1	1	1
NONE OF THEM	1	2	1	--	4	--	1	*	--	--
INSISTS ON "OTHER"	*	--	*	--	1	--	*	*	--	--
DON'T KNOW	3	2	3	4	2	*	2	2	*	1
REFUSED	2	1	2	*	1	1	2	2	--	--

VOTE26B. And are you more FOR your candidate, or more AGAINST the others?

	REGISTERED VOTERS ONLY						PROBABLE VOTERS			
	TOT	M	F	D	I	R	TOT	CRT	GWB	JK
NOT ASKED	5%	3%	6%	3%	7%	1%	5%	4%	--%	--%
FOR CANDIDATE	54	56	51	47	40	71	54	56	67	42
AGAINST OTHERS	36	36	36	45	48	21	36	34	27	52
MIXED (VOL.)	4	3	5	3	5	5	4	5	5	4
DON'T KNOW	1	1	2	1	--	1	1	1	1	1
REFUSED	*	1	--	--	--	1	*	--	*	--

VOTE26C. Would you say that you are pretty sure to vote that way, or that you might change your mind between now and the election?

	REGISTERED VOTERS ONLY						PROBABLE VOTERS			
	TOT	M	F	D	I	R	TOT	CRT	GWB	JK
NOT ASKED	5%	3%	6%	3%	7%	1%	5%	4%	--%	--%
PRETTY SURE	81	83	79	86	66	96	82	85	89	84
MIGHT CHANGE MIND	13	13	14	10	25	3	12	10	11	15
DON'T KNOW	1	1	2	1	2	*	1	1	*	1
REFUSED	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--

VOTE26D. Would you say it is absolutely certain you will vote in the upcoming election on November 2, that you probably will vote, probably WON'T vote, or definitely will not vote?

	REGISTERED VOTERS ONLY						PROBABLE VOTERS			
	TOT	M	F	D	I	R	TOT	CRT	GWB	JK
CERTAIN TO VOTE	78%	80%	76%	76%	71%	87%	80%	100%	82%	79%
PROBABLY WILL VOTE	19	18	19	20	25	13	20	--	18	21
PROBABLY WON'T VOTE	2	1	3	3	3	--	--	--	--	--
DEFINITELY WON'T VOTE	1	1	2	1	1	--	--	--	--	--
50/50 CHANCE (VOL.)	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--
DON'T KNOW	1	*	1	--	1	--	--	--	--	--
REFUSED	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--

VOTE27. When it comes right down to it, how much difference do you think it makes who gets elected President this year. A lot, some, only a little, or none at all?

	REGISTERED VOTERS ONLY						PROBABLE VOTERS			
	TOT	M	F	D	I	R	TOT	CRT	GWB	JK
A LOT	72%	71%	74%	77%	58%	84%	74%	77%	79%	72%
SOME	18	18	17	19	22	13	17	15	14	21
ONLY A LITTLE	6	7	6	3	14	1	6	5	4	6
NONE AT ALL	3	3	2	--	6	2	2	2	2	1
DON'T KNOW	1	1	1	1	--	*	1	1	1	--
REFUSED	*	--	*	*	--	--	*	--	--	--

BUSH04. In the 2000 presidential election, did you vote for Bush, Gore, Nader, Buchanan, someone else, or didn't you happen to vote in that election?

	REGISTERED VOTERS ONLY						PROBABLE VOTERS			
	TOT	M	F	D	I	R	TOT	CRT	GWB	JK
BUSH	48%	54%	43%	7%	44%	88%	49%	52%	78%	13%
GORE	28	26	29	68	21	1	28	31	6	58
NADER	3	3	3	4	7	*	3	4	*	7
BUCHANAN	*	--	*	--	*	--	*	*	--	*
SOMEONE ELSE	1	1	2	2	2	*	1	1	1	2
DIDN'T HAPPEN TO VOTE	15	13	17	17	19	9	14	8	12	16
INELIGIBLE (VOL.)	1	1	2	--	4	1	1	*	1	2
DON'T KNOW	1	1	1	2	1	*	1	1	1	1
REFUSED	2	1	3	1	1	--	2	2	1	1

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?

	REGISTERED VOTERS ONLY						PROBABLE VOTERS			
	TOT	M	F	D	I	R	TOT	CRT	GWB	JK
LIKE BUSH RE-ELECTED	49%	51%	47%	9%	37%	93%	49%	51%	90%	1%
LIKE SOMEONE ELSE	46	46	47	88	57	6	46	44	8	97
DON'T KNOW	4	3	4	2	5	1	3	3	2	2
REFUSED	1	--	2	--	1	*	1	1	--	--

CAND01. I'm going to read you a brief series of phrases. For each, please tell me if you think it accurately describes George W. Bush, John Kerry, both or neither? "Has been unfairly attacking his opponent" Which one, if either does that accurately describe?

	REGISTERED VOTERS ONLY						PROBABLE VOTERS			
	TOT	M	F	D	I	R	TOT	CRT	GWB	JK
BUSH	23%	22%	24%	48%	25%	2%	24%	25%	2%	56%
KERRY	29	30	28	7	15	59	29	31	51	3
BOTH	34	37	32	31	46	27	33	31	33	28
NEITHER	10	9	12	10	12	10	10	9	12	9
DON'T KNOW	3	2	4	3	2	1	2	3	2	2
REFUSED	1	1	1	1	--	--	1	1	--	1

CAND02. "Understands the problems ordinary people face" (PROBE FOR CATEGORIES AS NECESSARY)

	REGISTERED VOTERS ONLY						PROBABLE VOTERS			
	TOT	M	F	D	I	R	TOT	CRT	GWB	JK
BUSH	33%	35%	31%	6%	22%	67%	34%	35%	59%	2%
KERRY	29	28	31	64	28	4	30	28	5	67
BOTH	15	12	18	14	17	14	15	14	16	9
NEITHER	20	24	17	15	32	13	19	19	17	19
DON'T KNOW	2	2	3	1	2	2	2	2	3	1
REFUSED	*	1	*	--	--	--	*	*	--	1

CAND03. "Can be counted on to keep campaign promises" (PROBE FOR CATEGORIES AS NECESSARY)

	REGISTERED VOTERS ONLY						PROBABLE VOTERS			
	TOT	M	F	D	I	R	TOT	CRT	GWB	JK
BUSH	41%	44%	38%	9%	33%	76%	42%	43%	75%	4%
KERRY	23	21	25	54	20	4	23	25	1	56
BOTH	3	4	3	7	2	2	3	3	2	6
NEITHER	30	30	29	26	42	18	28	26	21	31
DON'T KNOW	3	1	4	4	3	*	2	2	1	3
REFUSED	*	--	1	1	--	--	*	*	--	1

CAND04. "Has a consistent record on the issues" (PROBE FOR CATEGORIES AS NECESSARY)

	REGISTERED VOTERS ONLY						PROBABLE VOTERS			
	TOT	M	F	D	I	R	TOT	CRT	GWB	JK
BUSH	46%	48%	44%	10%	41%	82%	46%	49%	80%	5%
KERRY	16	13	19	38	14	3	16	17	1	39
BOTH	10	12	7	13	10	6	10	8	8	14
NEITHER	20	20	19	27	25	6	19	18	6	31
DON'T KNOW	7	6	8	8	9	4	7	7	5	9
REFUSED	1	1	2	3	1	--	1	1	*	2

CAND05. "Will protect the United States from terrorism" (PROBE FOR CATEGORIES AS NECESSARY)

	REGISTERED VOTERS ONLY						PROBABLE VOTERS			
	TOT	M	F	D	I	R	TOT	CRT	GWB	JK
BUSH	52%	57%	47%	15%	46%	88%	53%	55%	87%	12%
KERRY	15	11	18	36	12	3	15	16	*	36
BOTH	22	24	20	36	29	6	22	19	11	33
NEITHER	8	5	11	9	12	*	8	6	1	14
DON'T KNOW	3	2	4	4	2	2	2	3	1	4
REFUSED	*	1	*	--	--	--	*	*	--	1

CAND06. "Will improve the US economy" (PROBE FOR CATEGORIES AS NECESSARY)

	REGISTERED VOTERS ONLY						PROBABLE VOTERS			
	TOT	M	F	D	I	R	TOT	CRT	GWB	JK
BUSH	37%	41%	33%	5%	26%	73%	38%	39%	68%	1%
KERRY	38	36	40	81	37	7	38	38	6	83
BOTH	7	9	5	2	7	11	7	7	10	3
NEITHER	13	13	14	7	25	7	13	11	12	10
DON'T KNOW	5	1	8	5	4	2	4	4	3	3
REFUSED	*	--	*	--	--	--	*	*	--	--

CAND07. "Will deal well with the federal budget" (PROBE FOR CATEGORIES AS NECESSARY)

	REGISTERED VOTERS ONLY						PROBABLE VOTERS			
	TOT	M	F	D	I	R	TOT	CRT	GWB	JK
BUSH	33%	35%	32%	7%	25%	65%	34%	34%	62%	--%
KERRY	33	32	35	71	33	6	34	34	3	77
BOTH	7	6	9	8	8	7	8	7	8	7
NEITHER	20	22	17	12	26	19	19	19	22	11
DON'T KNOW	6	6	7	3	9	3	6	6	5	5
REFUSED	*	*	*	--	--	*	*	*	*	--

CAND08. "Will protect the environment" (PROBE FOR CATEGORIES AS NECESSARY)

	REGISTERED VOTERS ONLY						PROBABLE VOTERS			
	TOT	M	F	D	I	R	TOT	CRT	GWB	JK
BUSH	26%	26%	26%	7%	15%	52%	26%	26%	47%	2%
KERRY	42	43	41	75	45	14	42	43	16	79
BOTH	12	11	13	8	13	16	13	12	15	8
NEITHER	12	14	10	4	18	12	11	12	13	7
DON'T KNOW	8	6	10	6	8	5	7	8	9	5
REFUSED	*	1	*	--	--	1	*	*	*	--

CAND09. "Will make the US respected in the world" (PROBE FOR CATEGORIES AS NECESSARY)

	REGISTERED VOTERS ONLY						PROBABLE VOTERS			
	TOT	M	F	D	I	R	TOT	CRT	GWB	JK
BUSH	40%	42%	37%	9%	32%	74%	41%	43%	70%	4%
KERRY	32	27	37	72	29	5	33	32	3	75
BOTH	10	10	10	9	11	7	10	9	9	9
NEITHER	14	18	11	7	25	11	13	13	15	8
DON'T KNOW	3	2	4	3	3	2	3	3	2	3
REFUSED	*	--	1	--	--	1	*	1	1	--

QD03. Are you currently registered to vote in Wisconsin?

	REGISTERED VOTERS ONLY						PROBABLE VOTERS			
	TOT	M	F	D	I	R	TOT	CRT	GWB	JK
YES	93%	94%	92%	90%	94%	94%	92%	96%	93%	91%
NO	7	6	8	10	6	5	7	3	6	9
DON'T KNOW	*	1	*	--	--	1	1	*	1	1
REFUSED	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--

QD03A. Do you have definite plans to register on or before November 2 so you can vote in this year's election?

	REGISTERED VOTERS ONLY						PROBABLE VOTERS			
	TOT	M	F	D	I	R	TOT	CRT	GWB	JK
NOT ASKED	93%	94%	92%	90%	94%	94%	92%	96%	93%	91%
YES	7	6	8	10	6	6	7	3	6	8
NO	--	--	--	--	--	--	*	--	*	--
DON'T KNOW	--	--	--	--	--	--	1	*	--	1
REFUSED	--	--	--	--	--	--	*	*	*	--

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

	REGISTERED VOTERS ONLY						PROBABLE VOTERS			
	TOT	M	F	D	I	R	TOT	CRT	GWB	JK
DEMOCRAT	29%	24%	33%	100%	--%	--%	28%	28%	5%	60%
REPUBLICAN	36	36	36	--	--	100	37	40	63	5
INDEPENDENT	25	32	19	--	100	--	25	23	23	26
OTHER	8	8	8	--	--	--	8	7	7	8
NONE	1	1	2	--	--	--	1	1	2	1
DON'T KNOW	*	--	1	--	--	--	--	--	--	--
REFUSED	1	--	2	--	--	--	1	1	*	*

* 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 508 randomly chosen eligible state residents were interviewed for this survey by telephone between September 15, the day after the Senatorial primary, and September 21, inclusive. Some 468 of them said they would at least probably vote in the election in November.

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 potential voter 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".