

Election '04: Does Bush Get It?

Does George W. Bush get it?

That more than anything is the central political question at the doorstep of the 2004 presidential campaign. Bush crushes top Democratic challengers in head-to-head matchups, yet at the same time looks vulnerable on the same issues that tripped up his father in 1992: Economic discomfort, the empathy to recognize it, and the ability to fix it.

Nearly half of Americans today say most people are worse off than they were when Bush took office – and that half of the country favors the idea of electing a Democrat for president by 2-1. Such is the potential price of a troubled economy.

Nearly half of Americans also say Bush doesn't understand the problems of average people – and that half of the country favors a Democrat by an even wider margin, 4-1. Such is the potential price of a perceived lack of empathy.

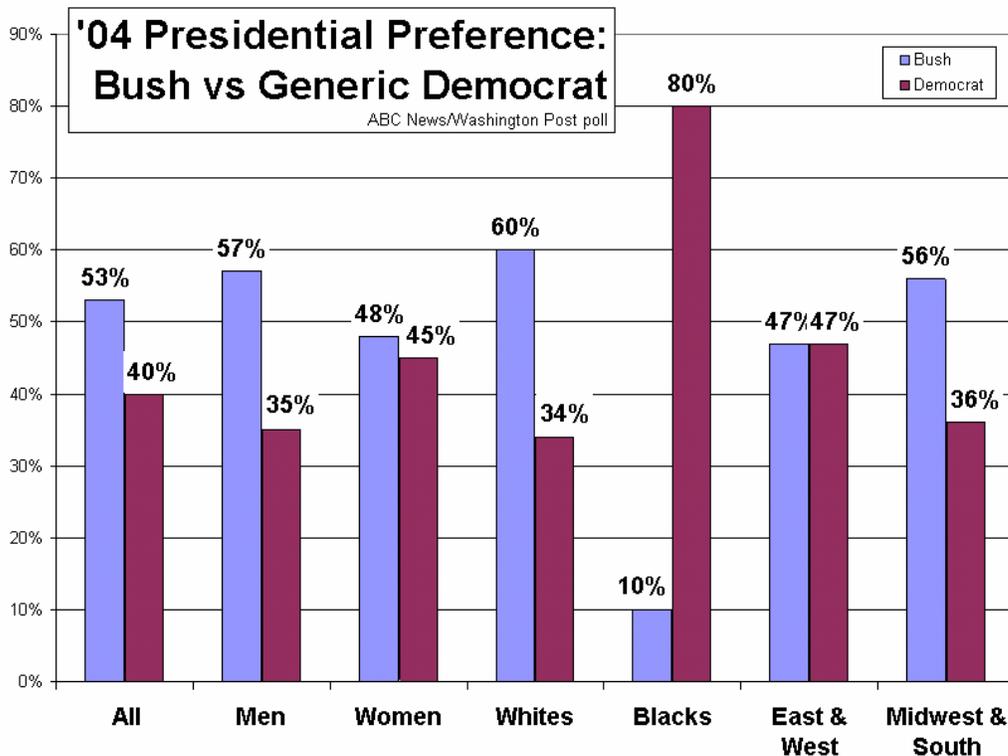
How these concerns and their political impact play out over the next 18 months is far from certain. But, as in 1992, it's the economy – and the president's ability to connect with ordinary people in economic distress – that again may define the 2004 election.

This time, though, there's another element: Security concerns. The echoes of Sept. 11, 2001 still ring loudly in the public's mind, and Bush's very strong ratings for responding to terrorism – from homeland security to Afghanistan to Iraq – so far mitigate the damage of economic concerns, and his far weaker ratings on other domestic issues. (See ABC News poll analysis of 5/1/03.)

As a result, in a head-to-head matchup testing Bush against a generic "Democratic nominee for president," Bush leads by 53-40 percent, with some striking differences among subgroups. It's almost a dead heat among women, and on both coasts. Bush loses nonwhites by nearly 2-1, and blacks specifically by 8-1. He trails in the nation's cities and among the poorest Americans. And he has huge leads in his core groups – among them, Republicans, conservatives and evangelical white Protestants.

	Preference for president:	
	Bush	Democratic nominee
All	53%	40
Reg. voters	54	40
Men	57	35
Women	48	45
Whites	60	34
All nonwhites	33	60

Blacks	10	80
City dwellers	43	51
Suburb/town/rural	55	38
East & West	47	47
Midwest & South	56	36
Liberals	29	63
Moderates	53	39
Conservatives	70	27
Evangelical white Protestants	69	26
Income <\$20K	38	56
Income \$20-30K	45	49
Income >\$30K	57	35
Democrats	15	79
Independents	54	35
Republicans	92	7



As noted, the differences by views of the economy, and Bush's empathy, are huge. Among people who think most Americans are worse off, Bush trails by 61-30 percent. Among those who think he doesn't understand "the problems of people like you," he lags by 74-17 percent. And it's a similar margin among those who say the economy's in poor shape.

Does Bush understand the problems of people like you?	Preference for president:	
Yes (51%)	Bush	Democratic nominee
No (48%)	86%	9
	17	74
Since Bush took office, most Americans have become:		
Better off or same (51%)	73	21
Worse off (48%)	30	61
Condition of the economy:		
Excellent or good (35%)	77	17
Not so good (46%)	49	44
Poor (19%)	17	75

ACTUAL DEMOCRATS – Testing Bush against an unnamed generic Democrat helps locate his political soft spots, but it isn't the most realistic test, because it allows his critics to conjure up an ideal opponent in their imaginations. Bush does even better when he's tested head-to-head against some of the actual, flesh-and-blood Democrats vying for the nomination to face him.

This poll tested Bush against Joseph Lieberman, Richard Gephardt and John Kerry, the three leading Democratic contenders. They run the same: Bush leads Lieberman by 61-34 percent; Gephardt by 60-35 percent, and Kerry by 60-34 percent – each receiving no more than base Democratic support.

It is, of course, exceedingly early in the campaign, and this result underscores how little-known Lieberman, Gephardt and Kerry are in comparison to the sitting president. The eventual Democratic nominee will become far better known over time, as did Bill Clinton in 1992 and Ronald Reagan in 1980 – both of whom initially trailed better-known incumbents, but went on to beat them.

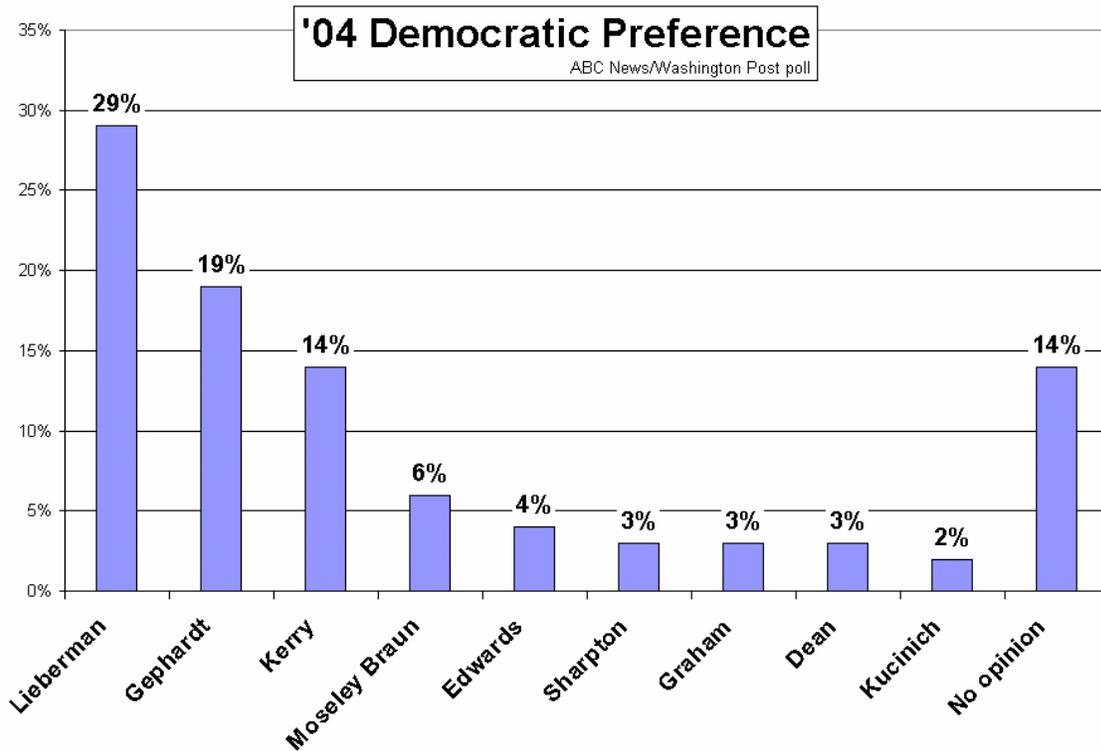
Indeed, in a sign of both the unsettled nature of the Democratic leadership, and Bush's dominance of public attention, this poll finds no public consensus on who's the leader of the Democratic Party: A third of Americans say "no one"; 22 percent offer no opinion; and about one in 10 name Gephardt or Lieberman.

THE DEMOCRATIC CONTEST – Before they take on Bush, the Democrats take on each other – as they're doing tonight at their first televised debate, on ABC News with George Stephanopoulos. This poll finds a statistically significant lead for Lieberman, likely the best-known Democratic candidate by dint of his exposure on the 2000 ticket.

Lieberman has 29 percent support among Democrats and independents who lean toward the Democratic Party – numerically his best in any national media-sponsored poll this year. Gephardt has 19 percent support, among his highest; Kerry, 14 percent. All six other candidates follow with support in the single digits.

The results are very similar when narrowed to registered voters, and also when narrowed to Democrats only, excluding Democratic-leaning independents.

'04 preference among leaned Dems	
Lieberman	29%
Gephardt	19
Kerry	14
Moseley Braun	6
Edwards	4
Sharpton	3
Graham	3
Dean	3
Kucinich	2



ATTENTION – But there’s a difference in the attention factor. Given the early stage of the race, relatively few leaned Democrats are paying much attention – 37 percent, compared to 63 percent who aren’t following it closely. And among those who are paying close attention it’s a closer contest between Lieberman and Gephardt – 28-24 percent, compared to 30-17 percent among those who aren’t paying close attention.

Following the race:	'04 preference among leaned Dems		
	Lieberman	Gephardt	Kerry
Very/somewhat closely (37%)	28	24	15
Not too/not at all (63%)	30	17	13

PROFILES OF SUPPORT – The candidates have different profiles of support. Among other notable results, Lieberman receives 27 percent support from blacks, compared to 17

percent for Moseley Braun and 12 percent for Sharpton, both of whom are black. (Gephardt has 13 percent support among blacks.)

Moseley Braun, the only woman in the race, wins support from 10 percent of women, compared to two percent of men. While in the single digits, her position is notable since she's raised the least money of the nine candidates – \$72,450 in the first quarter of 2003 – and has done little campaigning. John Edwards, by contrast, raised the most money, \$7.4 million, in the quarter, and has campaigned vigorously, so far to little apparent effect.

Lieberman leads in most groups, with his support peaking among better-off Democrats. He does about as well with Democratic-leaning independents as with mainline Democrats, a helpful sign for a general election campaign.

Gephardt, by contrast, does better with mainline Democrats than with independents – more helpful in primaries, less so in a general election – while Kerry does better with independents than with mainline Democrats.

	Among	
	Mainline Dems.	Dem-leaning indeps.
Lieberman	31%	27%
Gephardt	23	10
Kerry	12	21

Thought Gephardt is known for union support, Lieberman is competitive with Gephardt in union households (26 percent support for Lieberman, 23 percent for Gephardt), while in nonunion households Lieberman's lead opens up to 30-18 percent.

In addition to union households, Gephardt also is more competitive with older Democrats and with conservatives, among whom he has 23 percent support to Lieberman's 20 percent. Only about a fifth of leaned Democrats, though, describe themselves as conservatives.

Gephardt, of Missouri, runs about even with Lieberman in the Midwest, and is strongest in rural areas but comparatively weak in the cities. Kerry, of Massachusetts, does his best in the East and in the cities, and his worst in the Midwest. He leads Gephardt (but not Lieberman) among top-income Democrats and among liberals.

	'04 preference among leaned Dems		
	Lieberman	Gephardt	Kerry
All	29%	19	14
Men	31	19	17
Women	28	20	12
Whites	31	23	15
All nonwhites	28	14	12
Blacks	27	13	8

Union HH	26	23	15
Non union	30	18	14
East	34	17	22
Midwest	24	25	9
South	29	18	12
West	30	20	14
Liberal	32	14	18
Moderate	32	21	11
Conservative	20	23	13
Income >\$75K	37	15	25

METHODOLOGY - This ABC News/Washington Post poll was conducted by telephone April 27-30, 2003, among a random national sample of 1,105 adults, including an oversample of blacks (for a total of 169). The results have a three-point error margin. Fieldwork by TNS Intersearch of Horsham, PA.

Analysis by Gary Langer.

ABC News polls can be found at ABCNEWS.com on the Internet at:

<http://abcnews.go.com/sections/us/PollVault/PollVault.html>

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Results follow.

*= less than 0.5 percent

4. If the 2004 presidential election were being held today, would you vote for (George W. Bush, the Republican) or for (the Democratic nominee for president)?

Net Leaned Vote:

	Bush	Democratic nominee	Other (vol.)	Neither (vol.)	Would not vote	No opinion
4/30/03	53	40	*	2	1	3

5. How about if the candidates were (George W. Bush, the Republican), and (Joseph Lieberman, the Democrat,) for whom would you vote?

Net Leaned Vote:

	Bush	Lieberman	Other (vol.)	Neither (vol.)	Would not vote	No opinion
4/30/03	61	34	*	2	1	2

6. How about if the candidates were (George W. Bush, the Republican), and (John Kerry, the Democrat,) for whom would you vote?

Net Leaned Vote:

	Bush	Kerry	Other (vol.)	Neither (vol.)	Would not vote	No opinion
4/30/03	60	34	*	2	1	2

7. How about if the candidates were (George W. Bush, the Republican), and (Richard Gephardt, the Democrat,) for whom would you vote?

Net Leaned Vote:

	Bush	Gephardt	Other (vol.)	Neither (vol.)	Would not vote	No opinion
4/30/03	60	35	*	2	1	2

35. On another subject, who do you think of as the leader of the Democratic party?

	4/30/03
Tom Daschle	5
Hillary Clinton	2
Nancy Pelosi	*
Bill Clinton	3
John Kerry	4
Joe Lieberman	9
John Edwards	1
Dick Gephardt	11
Ted Kennedy	2
Bob Graham	*
Al Gore	3
Other	4
No one	22
No opinion	33

38. (ASKED OF LEANED DEMOCRATS) How closely are you following the race for the 2004 Democratic presidential nomination: very closely, somewhat closely, not too closely, or not closely at all?

	-----Closely-----			-----Not closely-----			No opin.
	NET	Very	Smwt.	NET	Not too	At all	
4/30/03	37	8	29	63	33	30	0

39. (ASKED OF LEANED DEMOCRATS) If the 2004 Democratic presidential primary in your state were being held today, and the candidates were: (Joseph Lieberman, Richard Gephardt, John Kerry, John Edwards, Al Sharpton, Bob Graham, Howard Dean, Dennis Kucinich or Carolyn Moseley Braun), for whom would you vote?

Net Leaned Vote:

	4/30/03	1/20/03	7/15/02*
Lieberman	29	27	10
Gephardt	19	14	5
Kerry	14	10	6
Moseley Braun	6	NA	NA
Edwards	4	11	3
Sharpton	3	7	NA
Graham	3	NA	NA
Dean	3	3	1
Kucinich	2	NA	NA
Other	1	1	3
None	1	4	*
No opinion	14	24	18

*Gore 46, Daschle 8

END