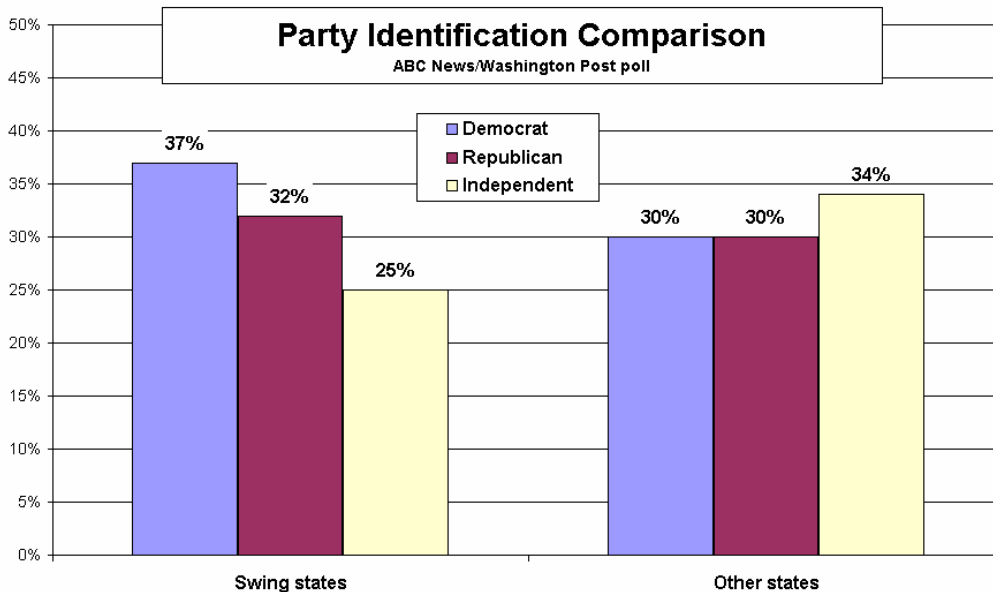


Battlegrounds are Close But Not Much Different

The 17 potential “battleground” states in 2004 look a lot like the rest of the country in terms of political attitudes. And when it comes to candidate preferences, they live up to their reputation: The presidential race is dead even.

One slight difference is the economy, which is more apt to be cited as the top voting issue in the battleground states (by 31 percent) than elsewhere (24 percent). It’s not a strong issue for George W. Bush, one he hopes the incipient recovery will improve.

What few differences exist probably can be attributed to a slight bulge in Democrats: Thirty-seven percent in these states identify themselves as Democrats, compared with 30 percent elsewhere. There are about equal numbers of Republicans, but fewer independents.



The result is a very close contest – slightly closer than in the rest of the country, though it’s close there, too. In a three-way contest among registered voters, George W. Bush has 44 percent support in the battleground states, compared with 50 percent elsewhere. There’s less difference (if any, given polling tolerances) in John Kerry’s support – 46 percent in the battleground states, 42 percent elsewhere. Ralph Nader’s in the mid-single digits.

There are few significant differences, though, on the issues of the day. On most measures, from Iraq to terrorism to the economy to candidate attributes, views in the battleground states look much like those in the rest of the nation.

Nor are there differences along ideological lines. In both groups of states, about one in five Americans are liberals, three in 10 are conservatives and 46 percent are moderates.

POTENTIAL BATTLEGROUNDS – Most of the 17 states were relatively close in 2000, when Gore won the popular vote (and nine of these states), but Bush won the Electoral College. But six of them weren't all that close – decided by five percentage points or more. This year they're best described as "potential" battlegrounds; some may not be.

It's a misnomer to call these all "swing" states, because that suggests they swing between Democratic and Republican majorities in presidential races. Some do: from 1976-2000 Ohio and Michigan each had four Republican winners and three Democrats, and Pennsylvania favored four Democrats and three Republicans. But others don't: Minnesota has had seven straight Democratic winners. Arizona has voted for a Democrat for president just twice since 1948; New Hampshire, just three times; and before Bill Clinton, Nevada hadn't backed a Democrat for 24 years.

The other states on the list are Arkansas, Florida, Iowa, Maine, Missouri, New Mexico, Oregon, Washington, West Virginia, and Wisconsin. Five of them – Florida, Iowa, New Mexico, Oregon and Wisconsin – were decided by less than one percentage point four years ago, with Gore winning all but Florida.

	Margin of victory in 2000	
	Winning margin	Winner
Florida	0.01%	Bush
New Mexico	0.1	Gore
Wisconsin	0.2	Gore
Iowa	0.3	Gore
Oregon	0.5	Gore
New Hampshire	1.3	Bush
Minnesota	2.4	Gore
Missouri	3.3	Bush
Nevada	3.5	Bush
Ohio	3.6	Bush
Pennsylvania	4.2	Gore
Maine	5.1	Gore
Michigan	5.2	Gore
Arkansas	5.4	Bush
Washington	5.6	Gore
West Virginia	6.3	Bush
Arizona	6.3	Bush

TRIAL HEATS – Among registered voters nationwide, Bush has a slight advantage over Kerry in a three-way race, 48 percent to 43 percent, with six percent for Nader in this ABC News/Washington Post poll. They're essentially even in the battleground states, with Kerry at 46 percent, Bush 44 and Nader seven.

Without Nader, the contest is about even nationally and in the battleground states, given sampling tolerances, while again Bush has a slight edge in the non-swing states.

	Presidential trial heats (Registered voters)					
	-----With Nader-----			-----Without Nader-----		
	All	"Battlegrounds"	Elsewhere	All	"Battlegrounds"	Elsewhere
Bush	48%	44	50	49%	46	51
Kerry	43	46	42	48	50	46
Nader	6	7	6			

The actual choice in November may be somewhere between this poll's all-or-nothing tests of Nader; it's far from clear at this point where he'll get on the ballot.

RATING BUSH – Bush's overall approval rating is similar, 49 percent in battleground states, 53 percent elsewhere. There's no difference when people are asked if Bush unites or divides the country (about an even split), or which candidate they trust more to handle the nation's main problems.

ECONOMY – As noted, more people in the battleground states cite the economy as the most important issue in their vote, and fewer cite terrorism (Bush's best issue). Bush's approval ratings for handling the economy and creating jobs are slightly lower in the battleground states, but they're fairly low everywhere. On the economy, 41 percent approve in the battleground states, 46 percent elsewhere; on jobs, 38 percent approve in the battleground states, 44 percent in the rest of the country.

	Most-important issue		
	All	Swing states	Elsewhere
Economy	26%	31	24
Iraq	23	23	24
Terrorism	22	18	24

But on other economic measures, the two groups are nearly indistinguishable. Wherever they live, nearly one in five says the economy is in poor shape, and the same number says most Americans are in better financial shape than they were when Bush took office in 2001. Just over one in three thinks the economy is improving.

IRAQ – On questions about the war and terrorism, again, views in battleground states differ very little from elsewhere. In both groups of states, just over half trust Bush more than Kerry to handle the situation in Iraq; half say the war was worth fighting; about two-thirds say the level of U.S. casualties is unacceptable; about six in 10 think the United States is bogged down; and 53 percent say the administration does not have a clear plan.

On terrorism, one difference is that people in battleground states are eight points more likely to say the Bush administration is doing all it can to deal with the threat of terrorism (62 vs. 54 percent).

	All	Issues and Attitudes	
		Battlegrounds	Elsewhere
Bush job approval	51%	49%	53%
Bush economy approval	44	41	46
Bush unites	50	50	50
Bush divides	48	48	48
War worth fighting	51	50	52
Casualties acceptable	33	33	33
Casualties unacceptable	65	64	65
Bush has clear plan	45	45	45
Bush doesn't have clear plan	53	53	53
Think U.S. is bogged down in Iraq	59	56	60
War will stabilize Middle East	34	36	33
Trust Bush to handle economy	47	46	48
Trust Kerry to handle economy	47	47	47
Economy in poor shape	18	17	19
Economy getting better	36	37	36

ATTRIBUTES – In terms of personal attributes, Bush does well in both groups of states as a strong leader, someone who’s honest and who sticks with his positions. He does less well in terms of empathy – only about four in 10, wherever they live, say he understands their problems.

Kerry does marginally better on empathy in the battleground states, again likely because of the higher number of Democrats. Fifty-five percent in those states say he understands their problems, compared with 48 percent in the rest of the country.

Bush’s early ads accusing Kerry of flip-flopping on issues look to have had an impact. About eight in 10 Americans say Bush sticks with his positions, while only half as many say that about Kerry. Yet again, though, these views are essentially identical among people who live in the battleground states and those living elsewhere.

METHODOLOGY – This ABC News/Washington Post poll was conducted by telephone April 15-18, 2004, among a random national sample of 1,201 adults. The results have a three-point error margin. Sampling, data collection and tabulation by TNS, Horsham, Pa.

Analysis by David Morris.

See previous analysis and full questionnaire at <http://abcnews.com/pollvault.html>.
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