



## State of Disunion

By Thomas A.W. Miller

**New York, NY, February 3, 2006** — When President Bush delivered his State of the Union address Tuesday night, he was facing an America that has become implacably split along partisan political lines. The rifts between the Republican and Democratic parties, politicians, and voters are now deeper than they have been in many years, certainly since 9/11 and possibly since the 1930's Depression.

In an Ipsos survey conducted last week, more than 80 percent of Americans said that Republicans and Democrats are more deeply divided now than they were four years ago about what needs to be done to make progress on critical national issues. Republicans and Democrats alike share this pessimistic assessment. And among those who believe political cooperation has sunk to a new low, a majority believes that the parties are so far apart on important subjects that compromises can no longer be reached.

Not only are there very few issues that the parties and their partisans still agree on, but the gaps in their opinions are now huge. Centrist shades of grey have been replaced by deep reds and brilliant blues in American political thought and discourse—more colorful, perhaps, but clashing.

The biggest disagreements concern foreign policy and Iraq. Three-quarters or more of Republicans register approval for the decision to go into Iraq in the first place, the current conduct of the war there, and the overall direction of US foreign policy. The Democrats' disapproval for these same decisions, meanwhile, is as high or even higher.

This partisan discord extends to the Administration's handling of the economy, to domestic social policies, and to reform of the Social Security system. Two-thirds of Republicans agree with the President's position on NSA wiretapping; three-quarters of Democrats disagree. About the only thing Republicans and Democrats agree about, domestically, is that the new Medicare prescription drug plan is confusing.

More fundamentally, Republicans and Democrats do not see eye-to-eye at all concerning the future of the United States. Whereas 58 percent of Republicans think the country is heading in the right direction, only 13 percent of Democrats concur. For a question often called the best measure of the nation's mood, this whopping 45 percentage-point difference between the parties is one of the largest in modern times.

These differences concerning foreign and domestic policies, as well as the future of the country, pale in comparison to divergent attitudes about President Bush himself. Overall, 78 percent of Republicans but merely 11 percent of Democrats approve of the President's job performance today—again, one of the widest gaps ever registered for a President since Eisenhower. The President has dramatically polarized the American political scene.

So what might this state of disunion mean, politically?

The mid-term Congressional elections are precisely where this discord might play out most dramatically. In an AP/Ipsos poll conducted in early January, half of Americans said they would like to see Congress be controlled by the Democrats after the next election, versus a third who desire continued Republican control. Republicans, of course, now control both houses of Congress, and incumbent candidates are notoriously difficult to beat in US Congressional races.

But the "Bush factor" might change things this year, if the gubernatorial race in New Jersey last November is an indicator. Three-quarters of the voters in that race said that President Bush was not an influence on their vote for New Jersey's governor—and among these voters, the Republican candidate Doug Forrester won by 4 points. But among voters who said the President was a factor in their vote for governor, those who opposed the President outnumbered those who



supported him by 14 points. The final result: A 10-point victory for Democrat Jon Corzine—exactly the swing caused by the Bush factor.

While it is too early to forecast the results of the 2006 Congressional elections, the acrimony between the Republicans and Democrats today could lead to significant shifts in party power next November—probably in the Democrats' favor.

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