

Iraq: The Separate Realities of Republicans and Democrats

March 28, 2006

The war with Iraq, now three years on, will surely be regarded by historians as one of the more unusual wars in history. The stated premise for going to war—Iraq's weapons of mass destruction and support for al-Qaeda—was unfounded, a number of US government commissions have concluded. However, other government leaders have made statements that leave ambiguities on what was in fact the case. Not surprisingly, over the years a number of studies have found that there have been widespread differences among Americans, not only in their attitudes about the war, but also their perceptions of what were, in fact, the realities surrounding it, including the premises for going to war.

A new study by WorldPublicOpinion.org has found that, despite the passage of years, many of these divisions persist. A closer analysis also reveals that these divisions are closely aligned with party identification. Indeed it seems fair to say that in regard to the Iraq war, Republicans and Democrats are living in separate realities.

The poll of 851 Americans, fielded by Knowledge Networks March 1-6, found that:

--Though their numbers are declining, a majority of Republicans continue to believe that before the war, Iraq had weapons of mass destruction or a major program for developing them and do not think that most experts believe Iraq did not have WMDs. A growing majority of Democrats believe the opposite on both points.

--A majority of Republicans, though declining, maintains the belief that Iraq was providing substantial support to al-Qaeda and that clear evidence of this support has been found, in contrast to large majorities of Democrats who hold opposing beliefs. A slight majority of Republicans believe that most experts agree that Iraq was providing support to al-Qaeda. Only 1 in 4 Democrats holds this view, but only a minority (and a declining one) perceives that most experts agree that Iraq was not providing support.

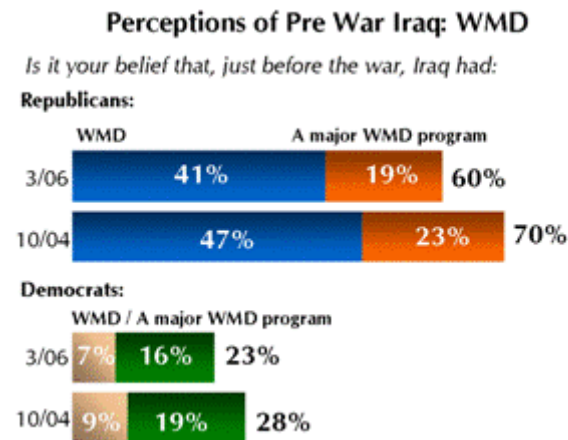
--Large majorities of Republicans and Democrats agree that the Bush administration is saying that Iraq had WMD or a major program for developing them and that Iraq was providing substantial support to al-Qaeda.

--Majorities of Republicans and Democrats continue to agree that the US should not have gone to war with Iraq if the US had intelligence that Iraq did not have WMD and was not supporting al-Qaeda—though this is a declining majority for Republicans. However, Democrats believe that President Bush would still have gone to war even if he had intelligence that Iraq did not have WMD or links to al-Qaeda, that he knowingly acted on false assumptions, and that he misled the public to make the case for war. Republicans differ on all of these points. Consistent with their perceptions, a large majority of Democrats say that the war with Iraq was a war of choice, while a modest majority of Republicans say that it was a war of necessity.

--Republicans and Democrats differ in their perceptions of whether world public opinion approved of the US going to war. A large majority of Democrats believes that world public opinion was mostly opposed, while Republicans are divided on what was the case.

Iraq and WMD

Though their numbers are declining, a majority of Republicans continue to believe that before the war, Iraq had weapons of mass destruction or a major program for developing them and do not believe that most experts believe Iraq did not have WMDs. A growing majority of Democrats believe the opposite on both points.



WFO 3/2006 Sixty percent of Republicans continue to believe that Iraq had WMD (41%) or a major program for developing them (19%), representing only a modest decrease from the 70 percent who held such beliefs in an October 2004 Program on International Policy Attitudes (PIPA) poll. Among Democrats, just 23 percent share these views, while 78 percent believe that Iraq had only some limited WMD-related activities but not a program (50%) or no WMD activities at all (28%).

There has been a growing awareness in both parties that “experts mostly agree Iraq did not have weapons of mass destruction, though it may have had some programs for developing them.” However, this is still a minority position among Republicans: 43 percent—up from 26 percent in 2004.

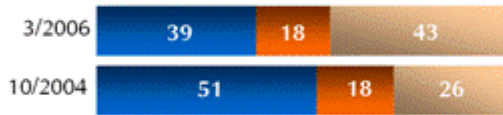
Democrats have gone from 50 percent having this view in 2004 to 62 percent today. The majority of Republicans either believe that most experts agree that Iraq did have WMD (39%, down from 51%) or that views are evenly divided (18%).

Perceptions of Experts on Pre War Iraq: WMD

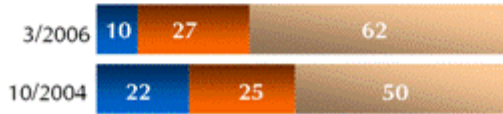
Is it your impression that, just before the war, that experts mostly agreed that Iraq:

Had WMD Were Divided Did not have WMD

Republicans:



Democrats:



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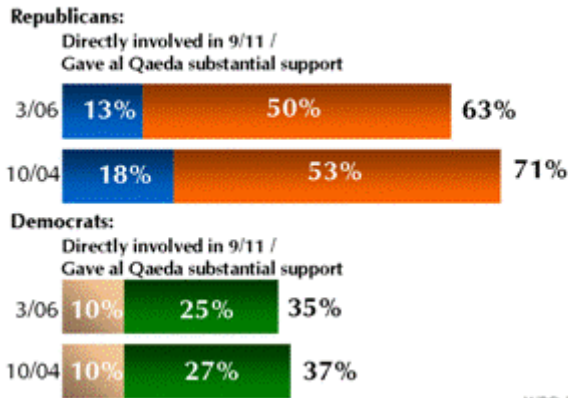
Republicans and Democrats differ on whether United Nations inspectors were eventually proven correct when they concluded that there was no clear evidence that Iraq had a major program for developing WMD. Among Republicans, only 40 percent perceived that the UN inspectors were proven correct, with a majority (56%) believing that they were proven incorrect. Perceptions among Democrats were quite the opposite: a strong majority (73%) believes the UN inspectors were proven correct.

Iraq and al-Qaeda

A majority of Republicans, though declining, maintains the belief that Iraq was providing substantial support to al-Qaeda and that clear evidence of this support has been found, in contrast to large majorities of Democrats who hold opposing beliefs. A slight majority of Republicans believes that most experts agree that Iraq was providing support to al-Qaeda. Only 1 in 4 Democrats holds this view, but only a minority (and a declining one) perceives that experts most agree that Iraq was not providing support.

Sixty-three percent of Republicans believe that Iraq gave substantial support to al-Qaeda, down 8 percentage points from October 2004. The exact same number of Democrats—63 percent—believe, instead, that there were some minimal contacts between Iraq and al-Qaeda (45%) or that there was no connection at all (18%). This number is up slightly from 57 percent in 2004. Only 35 percent of Democrats believe that Iraq gave substantial support to al-Qaeda.

Perceptions of Pre-War Iraq: Links to al-Qaeda



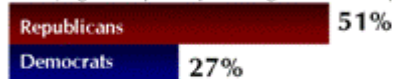
WPO 3/2006 A majority of Republicans (62%)

continue to believe that clear evidence has been found proving that Iraq was working closely with al-Qaeda, nearly the same percentage as in October 2004 (63%). Seventy-three percent of Democrats believe that such evidence has not been found, but, curiously, this is down from the 83 percent who held this position in October 2004.

Experts on Iraq and al Qaeda

On the question of the relationship between Iraq and al Qaeda is it your impression experts:

Mostly agree Iraq WAS providing substantial support to al Qaeda



Mostly agree Iraq WAS NOT providing substantial support to al Qaeda



Are evenly divided on the question



WPO 3/2006 A majority of Republicans (51%, down

from 57% in October 2004) still believe that experts mostly agree that al-Qaeda was providing substantial support to Iraq, while only about 1 in 4 Democrats holds that view (27%, up from 23% in October 2004). Yet the number of Democrats who believe that most experts think Iraq was not providing substantial support to al-Qaeda is only 40 percent (down from 45% in 2004), while another 32 percent believe that experts' views are evenly divided on this question (up from 28% in 2004).

What the Bush Administration Now Says About Pre-War Iraq

In spite of sharp differences in their perceptions of pre-war Iraq, Republicans and Democrats largely agree on what the Bush administration is now saying about pre-war Iraq—both in terms of WMDs and support for al-Qaeda.

What Bush Administration Now Says About WMD in Pre-war Iraq

Is it your impression that the Bush administration is currently saying that just before the war, Iraq had:

Republicans:



Democrats:



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Among Republicans, 74 percent believe the Bush administration continues to maintain that Iraq had WMD (38%) or a major program for their development (36%). Similarly, 70 percent of Democrats perceive the Bush administration as saying that Iraq had WMD (40%) or a major WMD program (30%).

While this overall number remains unchanged from 2004, there has been a sharp drop in the percentages who perceive that the Bush administration is saying that Iraq had actual WMD—26 points among Republicans and 36 points among Democrats. In both cases, this been accompanied by a migration to the perception that the administration is saying Iraq did not have actual WMD but did have a major program for developing them (up 18% for Republicans and 19% for Democrats) but also to the position that the administration is saying that Iraq only had limited WMD-related activities (up 5% for Republicans and 16% for Democrats).

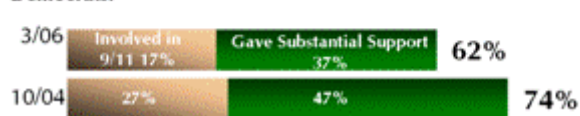
What Bush Administration Now Says About al-Qaeda and Pre-war Iraq

Which of the following comes closest to your impression of what the Bush administration is currently saying the relationship was, just before the war, between the Iraqi government under Saddam Hussein and the terrorist group al-Qaeda?

Republicans:



Democrats:



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On the issue of al-Qaeda, 62 percent of Democrats perceive the Bush administration as saying Iraq had direct involvement in 9/11 (25%) or simply provided substantial support to al-Qaeda (37%). Among Republicans, this overall number is 72 percent, with a smaller number perceiving that the administration is saying that Iraq was directly involved in 9/11 (14%) and a larger number perceiving that the Bush administration is saying that Iraq simply gave substantial support to al-Qaeda (58%).

As compared to 2004, Republicans show significant change in these perceptions. Among Democrats, though, there has been a 10-point drop in the perception that the Bush administration is saying that Iraq was providing substantial support and an 8-point increase in the perception of the administration saying that there were only minor contacts.

The Decision to Go to War

Majorities of Republicans and Democrats continue to agree that the US should not have gone to war with Iraq if the US had intelligence that Iraq did not have WMD and was not supporting al-Qaeda—though this is a declining majority for Republicans. However, Democrats believe that President Bush would still have gone to war even if he had intelligence that Iraq did not have WMD or links to al-Qaeda, that he knowingly acted on false assumptions, and that he misled the public to make the case for war. Republicans differ on all of these points. Consistent with their perceptions, a large majority of Democrats say that the war with Iraq was a war of choice, while a modest majority of Republicans say that it was a war of necessity.

When asked “If, before the war, US intelligence services had concluded that Iraq did not have weapons of mass destruction and was not providing substantial support to al-Qaeda,” 53 percent of Republicans believe the US should not have gone to war, as do 87 percent of Democrats.

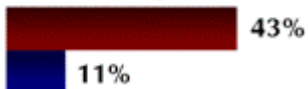
If No Pre-War Iraq WMD or al Qaeda Support

If, before the war, US intelligence services had concluded that Iraq did not have weapons of mass destruction and was not providing substantial support to al Qaeda do you think the US:

Should not have gone to war



Should still have gone to war for other reasons



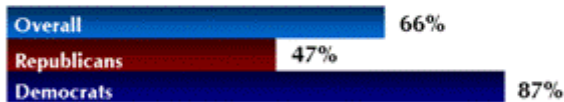
WFO 3/2006 While this number is unchanged for

Democrats, for Republicans it has declined from 60 percent in 2004. A growing number (36% to 43%) say that the US should have gone to war for other reasons. This shift may be related to the growing awareness that Iraq did not have WMD or links to al-Qaeda. Three-fourths of Republicans continue to believe that going to war with Iraq was the right decision, down only slightly from the 80 percent who held that view in October 2004. Thus it appears that continuing to support the war increasingly requires thinking that it was necessary for other reasons.

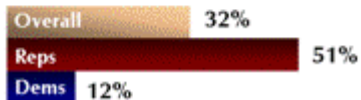
Would Bush Have Gone to War with Iraq in Either Case?

If, before the war, US intelligence services had told President Bush there was no reliable evidence that Iraq possessed or was building weapons of mass destruction or was providing support to al Qaeda, do you think

He would still have gone to war with Iraq for other reasons



He would not have gone to war with Iraq



WPO/KN 3/06 Republicans and Democrats differ

sharply on the question of what President Bush would have done if “before the war, US intelligence services had told President Bush there was no reliable evidence that Iraq possessed or was building weapons of mass destruction or was providing substantial support to al-Qaeda.” A slim majority (51%) of Republicans believes that Bush would not have gone to war if intelligence had shown that Iraq did not possess WMD or support al-Qaeda—modestly down from the 58 percent who held this position in October 2004. Democrats, on the other hand, overwhelmingly believe that he would have gone to war for other reasons (87%, up from 81%). A growing minority of Republicans agree—47 percent, up from 37 percent.

A majority of Democrats now believes that the President knowingly acted on incorrect assumptions in going to war, while Republicans differ strongly. A solid majority of Democrats (59%, up from 41% in October 2004) hold the view that President Bush knowingly made the decision to go to war on the basis of incorrect assumptions, while only 9 percent of Republicans share this view. Rather, 90 percent of Republicans believe Bush acted on information that was correct (44%, up from 39%), or that was incorrect, but the President believed it was correct (46%, down from 54%).

Republicans and Democrats agree, however, that the intelligence Bush received did say that Iraq was supporting al-Qaeda. Republicans are more definite (92%) than Democrats (61%). Thus it appears that the dispute over whether Bush knowingly acted on false assumptions centers around the WMD issue.

Consistent with these views, Republicans and Democrats differ on whether the President misled the American public to make the case for war. Eighty-three percent of Republicans believe that Bush gave the country the most accurate information he had, exhibiting a clear trust of the administration that has not diminished since the start of the war, in spite of various developments regarding the prewar situation in Iraq. However, 8 in 10 Democrats believe that Bush deliberately misled people to make the case for war, an increase from 76 percent who held that view in October 2004.

Consistent with these differing views of pre-war conditions, a large majority of Democrats (88%) say that the war with Iraq was a war of choice, while a modest majority of Republicans (54%) say that it was a war of necessity.

World Public Opinion on the Iraq War

Republicans and Democrats differ in their perceptions of whether world public opinion approved of the US going to war. A large majority of Democrats believe that world public opinion was mostly opposed, while Republicans are divided on what was the case.

Perceptions of World Public Opinion and Iraq War

Thinking about how all the people in the world feel about the US having gone to war with Iraq, do you think:

■ Majority favored ■ Were Divided ■ Majority Opposed

Republicans:



Democrats:



WFO 3/2006 Respondents were asked about “how all

the people in the world felt about the US going to war with Iraq in 2003.” Sixty-seven percent of Democrats say that the majority of people were opposed. Only 34 percent of Republicans agreed. Other Republicans were divided between the view that the majority was in favor (34%) and that the world public’s views were evenly balanced (30%).

Past PIPA polls asked the question in the present tense and responses were largely the same.

Curiously, as compared to October 2004, there has been a modest increase in Republicans’ perceptions that a world majority favored the war (rising from 22% to 34%) and a decline in the number of Democrats who believe that the majority opposed it (from 76% to 67%). Though polls largely show widespread opposition to the war, it may be that as the large-scale demonstrations against the war move further into the past, the impression of opposition may have faded a bit.