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PENNSYLVANIA 2004: WHAT REALLY MATTERS IN THE FINAL DAYS

By G. Terry Madonna and Berwood Yost

In the final weeks of the presidential campaign voters have settled on the issues that matter most to them. Typically, the economy would dominate elections nationally and in Pennsylvania, but this year voters have identified three issues that have a high salience to them: homeland security and terrorism, the war in Iraq, and the economy. The election, especially in Pennsylvania an important swing state, might well turn on which of these issues becomes more dominant in the remainder of the campaign. And it matters in the final electoral outcome which issue(s) voters finally choose.

The October 7 released Keystone Poll demonstrates how changing sentiments about what issues are most relevant to voters generate differing levels of support for each candidate. Whether it was the recent presidential debate, recent events on the ground in Iraq, or recent assessments about the war made by former government officials and weapons inspectors, more voters in Pennsylvania now believe that the situation in Iraq is most important to them in determining their vote choice. This change in the relative significance of Iraq has helped John Kerry gain a lead in the Pennsylvania contest—a lead of six percentage points among likely voters, 49 percent to 43 percent, as of the first week in October.

Between the September and October Keystone Polls, the proportion of state voters who said that the situation in Iraq was their key voting issue had grown from 12 percent to 23 percent. Iraq now ranks on the same level as homeland security and terrorism (23%) as the main reason Pennsylvania voters are casting a vote for either President George Bush or Senator John Kerry—and both rank slightly higher than the economy (21%).

George Bush has a strong advantage over John Kerry among those who believe terrorism is most important (83 percent to 12 percent), and Kerry leads Bush among voters concerned about the economy (63 percent to 26 percent). But it was the shift in the importance of Iraq that helps explain the Kerry lead in Pennsylvania. He now leads Bush among voters concerned about Iraq (63 percent to 28 percent).

So, what voters care about these issues? What are the profiles of voters concerned about the economy, terrorism, and Iraq? Concern about the economy seems evenly spread throughout the different demographic groups and regions of the state, with two exceptions. Independent voters are somewhat more likely than others to insist they are voting based on the economy, and men are more ready than women to place the economy first. Voters who cite homeland security and terror as the most important issue to them are more than any other group most likely to be conservative in political ideology, which also means that Republicans are more ready than Democrats or Independents to cite homeland security and terror.

The situation in Iraq is more significant to men than to women, and it's also more important to liberals and moderates than it is to conservatives. For many Democrats, Iraq has now become the defining issue in the campaign. Of course, since more liberals tend to vote Democratic and more conservatives tend to vote Republican, the election might well hinge on what issue(s) moderate voters believe are important. For now, moderates are leaning toward Iraq, but that could change.

If and how issue preferences change in the state will probably determine the election outcome in Pennsylvania.

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