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## Bush's approval rating hits new low in his presidency

### Associated Press

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*Friday, March 10, 2006*

WASHINGTON -- More and more people, particularly Republicans, disapprove of President Bush's performance, question his character and no longer consider him a strong leader against terrorism, according to an AP-Ipsos poll documenting one of the bleakest points of his presidency.

Nearly four out of five Americans, including 70 percent of Republicans, believe civil war will break out in Iraq -- the bloody hot spot upon which Bush has staked his presidency. Nearly 70 percent of people say the U.S. is on the wrong track, a 6-point jump since February.

"I'm not happy with how things are going," said Margaret Campanelli, a retiree in Norwich, Conn., who said she tends to vote GOP. "I'm particularly not happy with Iraq, not happy with how things worked with Hurricane Katrina."

Republican Party leaders said the survey explains why GOP lawmakers are rushing to distance themselves from Bush on a range of issues -- port security, immigration, spending, warrantless eavesdropping and trade, for example.

The positioning is most intense among Republicans facing election in November and those considering 2008 presidential campaigns.

"You're in the position of this cycle now that is difficult anyway. In second term off-year elections, there gets to be a familiarity factor," said Sen. Sam Brownback (news, bio, voting record), R-Kan., a potential presidential candidate.

"People have seen and heard (Bush's) ideas long enough and that enters into their thinking. People are kind of, 'Well, I wonder what other people can do,'" he said.

The poll suggests that most Americans wonder whether Bush is up to the job. The survey, conducted Monday through Wednesday of 1,000 people, found that just 37 percent approve of his overall performance. That is the lowest of his presidency.

Bush's job approval among Republicans plummeted from 82 percent in February to 74 percent, a dangerous sign in a midterm election year when parties rely on enthusiasm from their most loyal voters. The biggest losses were among white males.

On issues, Bush's approval rating declined from 39 percent to 36 percent for his handling of domestic affairs and from 47 percent to 43 percent on foreign policy and terrorism. His approval ratings for dealing with the economy and Iraq held steady, but still hovered around 40 percent.

Personally, far fewer Americans consider Bush likable, honest, strong and dependable than they did just after his re-election campaign.

By comparison, Presidents Clinton and Reagan had public approval in the mid 60s at this stage of their second terms in office, while Eisenhower was close to 60 percent, according to Gallup polls. Nixon, who was increasingly tangled up in the Watergate scandal, was in the high 20s in early 1974.

The AP-Ipsos poll, which has a margin of error of 3 percentage points, gives Republicans reason to worry that they may inherit Bush's political woes. Two-thirds of the public disapproves of how the GOP-led Congress is handling its job and a surprising 53 percent of Republicans

give Congress poor marks.

"Obviously, it's the winter of our discontent," said Rep. Tom Cole (news, bio, voting record), R-Okla.

By a 47-36 margin, people favor Democrats over Republicans when they are asked who should control Congress.

While the gap worries Republicans, Cole and others said it does not automatically translate into GOP defeats in November, when voters will face a choice between local candidates rather than considering Congress as a whole.

In addition, strategists in both parties agree that a divided and undisciplined Democratic Party has failed to seize full advantage of Republican troubles.

"While I don't dispute the fact that we have challenges in the current environment politically, I also believe 2006 as a choice election offers Republicans an opportunity if we make sure the election is framed in a way that will keep our majorities in the House and the Senate," said Ken Mehlman, chairman of the Republican National Committee.

Stung by criticism, senior officials at the White House and the RNC are reminding GOP members of Congress that Bush's approval ratings may be low, but theirs is lower and have declined at the same pace as Bush's. The message to GOP lawmakers is that criticizing the president weakens him -- and them -- politically.

"When issue like the internal Republican debate over the ports dominates the news it puts us another day away from all of us figuring out what policies we need to win," said Terry Nelson, a Republican consultant and political director for Bush's re-election campaign in 2004.

Bowing to ferocious opposition in Congress, a Dubai-owned company on Thursday abandoned its quest to take over operations at several U.S. ports. Bush had pledged to veto any attempt to block the transaction, pitting him against Republicans in Congress and most voters.

All this has Republican voters like Walter Wright of Fairfax Station, Va., worried for their party.

"We've gotten so carried away I wouldn't be surprised to see the Democrats take it because of discontent," he said. "People vote for change and hope for the best."

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