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## Poll favors Democrats in fall elections

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By Susan Page, USA TODAY

WASHINGTON — Americans are paying unusually close attention to the congressional elections in November, a USA TODAY/Gallup Poll finds, and they are more inclined to deliver big gains to Democrats than in any year since Republicans swept to control of the House and Senate in 1994.

The survey, taken Friday through Sunday, indicates that voters are more concerned about national issues than local ones — a situation that favors Democrats hoping to tap discontent over the Iraq war and gas prices — and prefer Democrats over Republicans on handling every major issue except terrorism.

President Bush looms as a significant drag: 39% of those surveyed say they are less likely to vote for a candidate who supports Bush. Just 21% say they would be more likely.

"At this point, it certainly looks like a significant tilt to the Democrats, but it's still quite early," says James Campbell, a political scientist at the University of Buffalo and author of *The Presidential Pulse of Congressional Elections*.

Democrats including House leader Nancy Pelosi of California express optimism about winning the 15 seats needed to take control. They are hampered, though, by the limited number of competitive districts across the country.

"Things are difficult, and there's a reasonable chance we'll lose some seats in both bodies," says Republican pollster David Winston, a former adviser to House Republicans. "But at the moment the majorities look reasonably solid because Democrats haven't put into play the sort of seats they need to."

The telephone poll of 1,000 adults has an error margin of +/- 3 percentage points.

Among the findings:

- Voters are interested in the election at levels not usually seen in non-presidential years. More than a third have thought "quite a lot" about the congressional elections. Seven of 10 say they are very motivated to get out and vote this year.
- Democrats are particularly engaged: 56% of Democrats say they are "more enthusiastic about voting than usual," the highest level of enthusiasm since the question was first asked in 1994. In comparison, 43% of Republicans say they are more enthusiastic than usual.
- Americans are increasingly likely to identify themselves as Democrats. Including those who "lean" to one party or the other, 55% call themselves Democrats, 38% Republicans — the biggest edge for Democrats since 1998. By 54%-38%, those surveyed say they'd vote for the Democratic congressional candidate over the Republican one in their district if the election was held today.

- That said, voters aren't particularly enamored of Democratic officeholders. Congressional Democrats have an approval rating of just 38%, one percentage point above Bush and five above congressional Republicans. A 54% majority of those polled say they would like to see a third major political party.

- Democrats are preferred by double digits over Republicans to handle four of the five top issues: Iraq, government corruption, the economy and health care. Republicans are preferred by 11 percentage points on handling terrorism.

- By 50% to 39%, those surveyed say most members of Congress don't deserve re-election. When it comes to their own representative, however, 61% say he or she does deserve re-election. That disparity isn't unusual, and it doesn't provide any guarantees for incumbents. In the summer of 1994, for instance, 60% said their own representative deserved re-election. That percentage had dropped to 53% by the November elections that swept many Democrats out of office.

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