

Follow-up Report – Global Strategy Group November 2007 Survey

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For this report, we took a closer look at the survey data relating to the importance of crime as a public policy issue in today's political environment. Among our most interesting findings: Democrats were the most likely to perceive an increase in crime, and suburban Democrats and African-American Democrats were more likely to say that reducing crime is the most important issue facing the country. This is particularly intriguing with regard to suburban Democrats, since they did not perceive crime as increasing.

Perceptions of an Increase in Crime

The perception that crime is getting worse is by far most prevalent among the White population. Of those who were more likely to say there is more crime today than a year ago, 61.4% were White. Only 16.9% of that group were Latino, and 18.3% were African-American. This raises interesting questions, since crime has decreased. It could be seen as paradoxical, since minority communities tend to bear the brunt of crime more than Whites. There are most likely a variety of sociological factors contributing to a much greater tendency among Whites to believe that crime is increasing. One can hypothesize that the impressions they receive via the mass media are an important factor. (We explore this aspect of the issue below.) The rhetoric of certain sectors of the political class are most likely another factor. But in the case of the influence of the media and of politicians, the question remains as to why the White population is so much more ready to accept the idea that crime is increasing, while African-Americans, Latinos and other groups are not. This is a topic worthy of further study.

It was surprising to see that a much higher percentage of Democrats were more likely to say that crime has increased than Republicans or independents. Of those who were more likely to perceive an increase in crime from a year ago, 47% were Democrats. Only 24.1% were Republicans, and another 24.1% were independents. We explored this question with regard to African-Americans, and found that large majorities of all political groups believe there is more crime now than one year ago. But again, African-American Democrats (90.4%) were the most likely to have this belief; 83.3% of African-American Republicans and 77.4% of African-American independents perceived an increase in crime.

We analyzed the data controlling for place of residence, and people in urban areas were more likely to say that there is more crime than a year ago. Large majorities of all groups fell into this category. This is not surprising, given the higher incidence of crime in urban areas, coupled with the mass media's daily focus on sensational crimes. But again, there were more urban Democrats (81%) than Republicans (65.5%) or independents (68.5%) who had this belief.

The greater propensity of Democrats to perceive an increase in crime is intriguing, since it would seem to fly in the face of the common perception that Republicans are more concerned about crime than Democrats. This raises a number of possibilities: for example, do Republicans have a better sense of the dimensions of the crime problem, while still advocating more punitive approaches? Have the political and media elites been operating on faulty assumptions with regard to Democrats' fear of crime? Is a sea change occurring among Democrats as the baby boom generation reaches retirement age?

Perceptions of Crime as the Most Important Policy Issue Facing the Nation

As with perceptions of the prevalence of crime, Whites were far more likely than Blacks and Latinos to say that reducing crime was the most important issue for the President and Congress to address. Nearly 58% of those who agreed with this statement were White, compared with 21% Latinos and 17.3% African-Americans. And in another finding consistent with the data on perceptions of crime, Democrats stood out as feeling the strongest that crime is the most important issue.

Significant majorities of all groups said that reducing crime is an important issue for the President and Congress to address, with Republicans and independents leading the way (79.8% of Republicans, 70.9% of independents, and 68.9% of Democrats). But it was Democrats who were more likely to say that reducing crime was "the most important issue" for the President and Congress to address. Nearly 30% of Democrats (28.8%) gave this answer, compared with 17.9% of Republicans and 26.2% of independents.

When controlling for race, African-American Democrats were far more likely than African-American Republicans to say that reducing crime was the most important issue - 32.6% vs. 7.1%.

Examining the question from the standpoint of place of residence, suburban Democrats were nearly as likely as suburban independents (27.5% of Democrats compared with 31.8% of independents) to say that reducing crime was the most important issue for the President and Congress to address. Only 14.8% of suburban Republicans felt this way.

Individuals with a college degree or higher were more likely to say that crime was not an important issue to be addressed by the President and Congress. Individuals with some college experience were more likely than others to say that reducing crime was an important issue.

So once again it is Democrats who are expressing a greater concern about crime as a public policy issue, above terrorism, the economy, health care, or anything else. We have the added element of suburban Democrats being more prone to feel this way than Republicans or independents, even though crime is a greater problem in urban areas. This again raises questions about our basic assumptions regarding how Democrats view this issue. It also motivates us to examine the role of the media in shaping these perceptions.

The Desire for Politicians to Talk More About Crime

Individuals between the ages of 40 and 60 were more likely to report that politicians are not talking enough about preventing crime. Forty-five percent of the 40-60 age group agreed that elected officials are not talking enough about preventing crime, compared with 24.6% of those under 40. This conforms with our understanding that it is the older sector of society that wants more done about crime.

People living in urban areas were more likely than rural or suburban residents to report that politicians are not talking enough about preventing crime - 47.1% of urban residents, compared with 33.2% of rural residents and 19.7% of suburban residents. This is also consistent with what we would expect, given that urban areas experience more crime than suburban or rural areas.

Democrats were much more likely than independents and Republicans to report that politicians are not talking enough about preventing crime. Specifically, 45.4% of Democrats believed that politicians are not talking enough about crime, compared with 25.4% of Republicans and 23.8% of independents. Women were more likely than men to report that politicians are not talking enough about preventing crime – 54% of women felt that way, compared with 46% of men. These findings are perhaps not as surprising as they might initially seem. The question posed here is not of a similar nature to those about the prevalence of crime and its priority as a public policy issue. The question posed here concerns “preventing” crime, which is a different matter than, say, “fighting” crime. Talk of “prevention” suggests proactive social policies, perhaps increased government spending, in such areas as education, health care, economic development, anti-gang programs, etc. Those are all steps traditionally favored more by Democrats and by women.

Perceptions of a Crime Problem and Media Sources

There is a general belief that television news, particularly local news, greatly distorts the scope of the crime problem by focusing so heavily each day on “police blotter” reporting. If viewers are fed a steady diet of murder, rape, and kidnapping, it is not unreasonable to conclude that a certain number of them will believe that crime is out of control, that they are living in a society in which danger lurks around every corner. The survey’s findings tend to confirm this proposition. Two out of three people who said that crime is a “very serious problem” in America get most of their news from television. Among those who considered crime to be a “somewhat serious problem,” a somewhat smaller number, 54.9%, get most of their news from television. The majority of people who said reducing crime is the most important issue for the President and Congress to address get most of their news about crime from television.

Of those surveyed who said reducing crime is not an important issue, a plurality (30.8%) get their crime news from newspapers. Only 26.9% of this group gets most of its news

from television. Another 23.1% of this group gets the majority of its news from the internet, and 11.5% get most of their news from radio.

We also examined which television news people are watching. Among those who said crime was a “very serious problem,” 51.6% get most of their news from local television networks. Only 29.4% of this group get the majority of their news from cable news networks. Individuals who got the majority of their news about crime from local news stations were more likely to say that reducing crime is the most important issue for the President and Congress to address. These data further buttress the argument that local television news bears much responsibility for creating the perception that crime is on the rise, that it is out of control, and that it is the highest priority facing our political leaders.

We do not have data on television viewing by racial category, so we are unable to further probe what role (if any) the media play in making Whites so much more apt to believe that crime is on the rise. This is a question worth pursuing in future studies, since one can presume that African-Americans and Latinos also watch a significant amount of local television news, yet they do not appear to be responding in the same way to its depiction of the crime problem.

Concern About Crime and Politicians’ Focus on Terrorism

We explored the relationship between perceptions of crime as a policy issue and the government’s focus on terrorism. Our findings in this area are quite interesting: nearly two out of three survey respondents (64.1%) felt that our elected officials spend too much time talking about terrorism. For those who said crime is a “very serious problem,” nearly half (48.5%) strongly agreed with the statement that elected officials spend too much time talking about terrorism. And a large majority (71.1%) of people who viewed reducing crime as the most important issue for the President and Congress to address agreed that elected officials spend too much time talking about terrorism. Among those who said reducing crime is an important issue, 61.6% agreed that elected officials spend too much time talking about terrorism. The same response held true for those who did not believe crime was an important issue (72% agreed, 60% of them strongly).

These findings are striking, given the government’s emphasis on the “War on Terror” since 9/11. The Bush administration has consistently stressed the theme that terrorists pose a grave risk to America, that we are under constant threat from terrorist plots, and that we must be hyper-vigilant about possible terrorists in our midst. The responses to the survey raise more questions. Has the public tired of the government’s constant talk of terrorism? Are people beginning to feel that the government is blowing the problem out of proportion? Do people want the government to continue doing everything it is doing to fight terrorism, but don’t want to hear about it? Why do people react one way to media and government portrayals of the crime problem, but turn around and say they think our leaders are spending too much time talking about terrorism? On another survey question, respondents indicated that they still consider terrorism a high priority. Thirty-three percent chose “preventing another terrorist attack” from a list of six options, including: providing a quality public school education for all children (chosen by 31%);

guaranteeing affordable health care for all Americans (chosen by 28%); promoting economic development and creating new jobs (chosen by 26%); reducing crime (chosen by 23%); and reforming immigration laws (chosen by 21%) as the “most important” issue for the President and Congress to address. A more detailed inquiry into the reasons behind the response to the terrorism question is in order.

Perceptions of Other Social Issues

We broke down the survey responses with regard to other social issues. White Democrats were more likely to say that education is the most important issue facing the country (34.6% Democrats, 20.8% Republicans, and 34.7% independents). White independents were more likely to say that health care is the most important issue -- 35.1%, compared with 28.7% of Democrats and 16.1% of Republicans. White Republicans were more likely to say that health care is not an important issue, although the numbers were small: 14.7%, compared with 5.3% of White independents and 1.7% of White Democrats. Latino Democrats were also more likely to say that health care is the most important issue -- 40.6%, compared with 20% of Latino independents and 34.5% of Latino Republicans. Latino Republicans were more likely to say that health care is not an important issue -- 17.2%, compared with 8.9% of independents and zero Democrats.