

Iraq trumps traditional issues for older U.S. voters

By Jane Sutton

America's elderly enjoy outsized influence in elections because they vote in greater numbers, but this year they've focused their clout on the Iraq war more than traditional concerns such as health and retirement benefits.

Poll after poll shows the U.S. war is uppermost in the minds of the gray-haired legions as they help decide whether President George W. Bush's Republican Party will keep control of Congress in the November 7 election.

"The war in Iraq; it upsets me terribly. I think we weren't told the truth," said 85-year-old Florence Feinstein, who recently skipped her afternoon card game to discuss Medicare prescription drug benefits with Democratic congressional representatives at a retiree center in Sunrise, Florida.

The new drug benefits are important to Feinstein, who relies on six prescription medications. But it is not the top election concern for her, nor for many of her contemporaries surveyed by the Pew Research Center, which found the Iraq war the main issue among voters in all age groups.

"Iraq is the No. 1 issue for seniors who say they will cast a ballot based on national issues," said Andrew Kohut of the center.

The U.S. Census Bureau says there are more than 36 million people 65 and over in the United States out of a population of about 300 million. In the 2002 mid-term election, 61 percent of that group voted, compared with 34 percent of those under age 65.

The drug plan that created a new benefit for those 65 and older was expected to be a key issue in the upcoming election, in which Democrats appear poised to win control of the U.S. House of Representatives and possibly the Senate.

Republicans touted the drug plan as a money saver for seniors and expected gratitude at the polls. Democrats pointed to its flaws.

But it has become "sort of politically neutral," said Sen. Gordon Smith (news, bio, voting record), head the Senate Aging Committee.

"At first there was a crescendo of complaints -- it got pretty loud. ... Now I hardly even hear of it," said Smith, an Oregon Republican.

Iraq, however, is clearly on the minds of the elderly. The Gray Panthers, a retiree group, urged members to write to Congress to demand U.S. troops come home from Iraq.

And in America's grayest congressional district, where Florida Republican Rep. Clay Shaw is in a too-close-to-call race, the war in Iraq topped the list of voter concerns among 21 percent of respondents in a Research 2000 poll conducted last week for the South Florida Sun-Sentinel.

'IT'S IRAQ, STUPID'

Medicare drug coverage was the top issue for just 6 percent of voters. The future of Social Security retirement benefits was the top issue for only 4 percent of voters in the southeast Florida district along the Atlantic coast where 37 percent of the electorate is 65 or older.

Shaw has represented the district that includes Palm Beach and Fort Lauderdale for 25 years, but his Democratic challenger, state Sen. Ron Klein, has edged within a few points of him with commercials charging Shaw "refuses to even question the president's handling of the war."

Pollsters haven't seen such cross-generational agreement since 1992, when pocketbook issues dominated in all age groups and helped put Democrat Bill Clinton in the White House and his party in control of both houses of Congress.

"It was the economy, stupid, in 1992. It's Iraq, stupid, this year," said Del Ali, head of the nonpartisan Research 2000 firm.

Analysts expect the war focus will favor Democrats because voters are in the mood for change and because the strongest anti-war sentiment is among Democrats and independents, who are also more eager to get to the polls than Republicans are.

(Additional reporting by Joanne Kenen in Washington)

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