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Job Losses Unsettle Republicans

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By Juliet Eilperin

Washington Post Staff Writer
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Congressional Republicans are watching warily as President Bush's approval ratings slide in two major issues -- the economy and Iraq -- and wondering if voter anxiety might cost them seats in next year's election.

Of the two, the question of the economy is particularly worrying GOP lawmakers, who fear they could be blamed for the hundreds of thousands of jobs that have been lost under the Bush White House and the Republican-controlled Congress. The ongoing conflict in Iraq, and voters' reluctance to keep pouring billions of dollars into that country, also are causing discomfort in GOP circles. But Republicans said they remain confident that the public, which tends to trust the GOP on questions of national security, would back the president and his party on Iraq in the end. Some Republican analysts, in fact, say they would welcome a debate that focuses more on Iraq -- even with ongoing U.S. deaths and other problems -- rather than jobs.

"I'd love to have Democrats throw us into the briar patch of Iraq and terrorism," said GOP pollster Glen Bolger.

Republican lawmakers see Bush as their party's unquestioned leader and have been reluctant to complain about his handling of domestic or international matters. But recent independent and GOP polls, coupled with extensive conversations with constituents, have some of them worried about a potential voter backlash 14 months from now. A recent Washington Post poll found that 42 percent of Americans approve of Bush's handling of the economy, down from 45 percent a month ago. The president has suffered a similar slip in public approval of his handling of the Iraq situation: 52 percent, compared with 56 percent a month ago.

Recent interviews with Republican lawmakers found considerably less angst about Iraq than about the economy, which has shed 2.6 million jobs since Bush took office. Sen. Lindsey O. Graham (R-S.C.) said voters see the steady exodus of manufacturing jobs, particularly in the South, as "happening on our watch. . . . Obviously that bothers me in terms of the political outcome in '04."

In a memo to House members last week, GOP Conference Chairman Deborah Pryce (Ohio) said Republicans face a "rough communications terrain," especially concerning the economy. "The issue of the economy is more important than ever," she wrote, "and

because voters tend to define the economy in the context of jobs, our central message must remain focused on jobs. It is not possible for you to talk about jobs too much!"

But several Republicans complained in a closed-door meeting last week that party leaders had yet to offer concrete legislative solutions to the country's economic distress. Rep. Walter B. Jones Jr. (R-N.C.) recounted recently meeting a man from his district who had just lost his job at TRW Inc. "What am I going to tell people about jobs?" Jones said in an interview. "People are hurting, and people don't see any leadership or direction." He said he cannot simply "say 'jobs, jobs, jobs' and sound like a parrot."

The president's recent request for an additional \$87 billion to fund operations in Iraq has exacerbated these concerns, several lawmakers said. House Majority Leader Tom DeLay (R-Tex.) summoned White House communications director Dan Bartlett to the Capitol last week for help in devising a communications strategy for the spending proposal. Republicans are acutely aware of what happened to Bush's father, the president who won the Persian Gulf War only to lose his reelection bid to Bill Clinton as the economy sagged. They find it frustrating that some economic indicators have improved recently without an accompanying uptick in new jobs.

"It's not panic yet, but it's just short of that," said Thomas E. Mann, a congressional scholar at the Brookings Institution. "It's a concern that real conditions on the ground, both in the economy and in Iraq, have raised serious questions about the performance of the Bush administration and the Republican majority."

A recent poll by David Winston for House Republicans found that 37 percent of Americans feel the country is moving in the right direction and 51 percent say it is headed in the wrong direction. Winston emphasized that the president has plenty of time to nurture the nation's economy in the coming year. But for now, he said, voters are "unsettled" on the issue and looking for solutions. "The thing that is driving people right now is jobs and the economy," he said, noting that 33 percent of respondents identified it as their top concern. Fourteen percent ranked defense and terrorism as No. 1. Democratic Congressional Campaign Committee chairman Rep. Robert T. Matsui (Calif.) said voter unrest over the economy is proving a boon for his party and could have "profound" implications for the upcoming election.

"We're getting more and more candidates interested in running against Republican incumbents," Matsui said.

Bush's \$87 billion request for Iraq -- and particularly the \$20 billion of it earmarked for reconstruction -- is generating some GOP resistance in Congress. Jones said he would vote against the reconstruction money if it were separated from the rest of the funding request.

Rep. Ginny Brown-Waite (R-Fla.) said she wants to make sure the reconstruction funds are "a loan, not a gift" to Iraq. "We didn't cause the decaying infrastructure," she said. "It was Saddam Hussein who caused the decaying infrastructure."