

George Bush's Convention

August 25. Next week, for the first time in its history, the Republican party will convene in New York City to nominate candidates for president and vice president of the United States. Some may be surprised that the Grand Old Party has never met in New York before. None will be surprised at the outcome of the convention—the renomination of President Bush and Vice President Cheney and the adoption of a platform dictated by the White House and shepherded through the drafting process by Republican leaders in the Congress.

Earlier this week I heard television stations that are covering the convention urge viewers to tune in, because conventions are full of surprises. Not any more. Certainly not this one. The convention in New York has been thoroughly orchestrated and will come off as planned, with the speeches starting and ending just as the television audience reaches its peak. Republicans are very good at that. However, just because the convention will not contain surprises does not mean that it is unimportant.

When the Democrats met in Boston, as we noted earlier, in Ellen Goodman's words, the goal for John F. Kerry was to turn Democratic supporters from those voting for ABB (Anyone But Bush) to JFK (John F. Kerry). The verdict is still on the success or failure of that effort. What, then, is the goal for George W. Bush's convention?

Put simply, President Bush's goal must be to demonstrate to the American people that he still deserves their trust. He won in 2000—let's not get into the debate over who won the election; that is interesting but old news—because voters trusted him more than they trusted Vice President Gore. Now he must demonstrate that his actions over the last four years have earned that trust. To this point, the race is dead even. Most polls show the national vote within the margin or error. If one looks at state-by-state polls, Senator Kerry is ahead, but the results look almost as close as those in 2000 were. (Check out state-by-state polls at <http://www.electoral-vote.com/>.) Senator Kerry got a very small "bump" in poll ratings after the Democratic National Convention; President Bush needs to gain more from his party's gathering in New York.

Here is why the convention is so important for President Bush. Incumbents in recent years have enjoyed a convention bounce of 8% on average; if President Bush's bounce is less than that, commentators will add that to the litany of statistics in which he appears weaker than previous winning incumbents:

- The average winning incumbent's job approval rating at this point has been around 60%; no winning incumbent's rating has been below the low 50% range; President Bush's rating now stands at 48%;
- Citizens have felt that the country is moving in the right direction when they have re-elected incumbents, with the average on that question about 52%; only about 37% now feel the country is moving in the right direction;
- Following their conventions, winning incumbents have had a 16% advantage on average, with every winner have at least a double-digit lead; President Bush will need a boost of about 10% to reach those levels.

Polls in August or September do not determine election winners. Much can still happen; but President Bush has to avoid appearing like a doomed candidate. And the Democrats in their "spin" after the election will highlight numbers like those just cited. They will hope that this election is like past ones, in which the incumbent's party loses 4-5% of its share of the two-party vote after the second convention.

What can President Bush do to improve his situation? He must rely on his communications skills, the same skills that won him the confidence of Americans four years ago. Note that I said "communications" skills, not "oratorical" skills. Every knows that President Bush is not a gifted orator, if by that one means that his speech is flawless and his arguments crafted for rhetorical eloquence. But most Americans do not speak like a Kennedy or a Bryan or an FDR. The average American has no difficulty listening the President Bush's Texas twang; the average American likes it and relates to it.

The question at the convention is whether they believe what he says. He must convince citizens that he can be trusted, that he did not get us into a war on false pretenses, even if the cause was just, because Americans want to believe what the President says to them. He must convince citizens tired of the war in Iraq that he does have a plan to extricate us that has a chance for success, that the failure of his post-war policy is understandable and not a predictor of the future. He must convince those who have suffered economically over the last four years that his plan for the country's economic future really will succeed, that we have turned the proverbial corner. He must convince moderate Republicans who voted for him in 2000 that he really is the "compassionate" conservative he ran as in that campaign, not a president whose policies will be dictated by Vice President Cheney, Secretary of Defense Rumsfeld, and Attorney General Ashcroft. He must, in essence, convince all of those who voted for him last time to do so again.

This is a tall order. The convention has been structured to meet these demands. The President will speak in an informal setting, because that will make his listeners more comfortable with him. Republicans politicians perceived to be more moderate—Senate McCain, former Mayor Guiliani, Governor Schwarzenegger—have been given prominent speaking slots at the convention. But in the final analysis, the judgment will be that made by the American people, based on how they perceive the convention and the party and the candidate that is seeking their votes. And that is why we return to our earlier point, that the major networks do a huge disservice by not showing gavel-to-gavel coverage, so the American public can have the best opportunity to judge the future leaders among whom they are asked to choose.