

Eight Weeks and Counting

September 8. In eight weeks we will know who will be president for the next four years. All of the polls have revealed a clear bump for President Bush from his very successful convention in New York—and his very well received acceptance speech. The early polls showed a double-digit bump. The most recent ones reveal a Bush lead in the 7% range. In the weeks ahead, we will look at various specific aspects of the campaigns—for a variety of offices—that we will observe during this semester. But before we turn to those subjects, let's take one look at where the presidential race currently stands.

Let's start with a contradiction. On the one hand, the incumbent candidates' standing on Labor Day has normally been a good predictor of the winner of the presidential election. Incumbent George H. W. Bush was in deep trouble by Labor Day 1992. He eventually lost to Bill Clinton. Four years later, President Clinton was far ahead of Bob Dole by Labor Day; he won easily. That would seem to give a clear advantage to President Bush.

On the other hand, the incumbent's convention is normally a number of weeks before Labor Day. The incumbent has normally received a boost from his convention, but the effect of the bump has been mitigated by Labor Day. In this case, the convention ended just before Labor Day, and the post-convention bump was still being felt. Perhaps the clear advantage for President Bush noted above is more apparent than real. What we do not know is what will happen in the compressed campaign that remains.

What about issues that are usually predictors? Again, I think the message is mixed. Most voters feel that the economy is going in the wrong direction. Fewer than a third of poll respondents think that the economy has improved, a decline of nearly 10% since July and equivalent to the assessments a year ago. President Bush's job approval rating stands at only 21% among non-Republicans. It remains considerably below 50% on the issue of handling foreign affairs. The American public tends to support a wartime president, but they do not see an exit strategy from Iraq, and they clearly want one. All of these factors seem to work against the reelection of President Bush.

However, just as they did four years ago, the American public finds President Bush to be far more likable than his opponent; they find him to be a strong leader. Terrorism is front-and-center on the minds of most Americans—and President Bush gets high marks as a leader of the war on terrorism. These factors all work well for a Bush reelection.

Are we hedging on how this will turn out? You bet we are! In our view, campaigns do make a difference. What is important to look at in the weeks ahead is the success or failure of the Kerry campaign to change the agenda. As we discuss in chapter 9, changing strategies during a campaign is difficult. The Bush campaign has been incredibly successful since the close of the Democratic convention at setting the agenda. They have been extremely adept at controlling what is discussed for six weeks. And they have turned the campaign from a referendum on the Bush record to a discussion of the qualifications of Senator Kerry. This is most unusual when an incumbent is running for reelection. If they continue to do so over the next eight weeks, President Bush, who remains a most popular individual, will win.

The Kerry campaign must change the strategy they followed at the Democratic Convention, a strategy based on demonstrating how qualified Kerry is to lead the nation in troubled times; they must find a way to focus campaign discourse on the record of President Bush's administration over the last four years. It will not be easy, but the campaign has already taken one step in that direction—bringing on a group of former Clinton advisors to aid in setting the course for the last eight weeks. In doing so, they have overcome one of the most difficult obstacles in changing strategy, reliance on the same people who set the failing course of action.

One final point: In the Bush campaign's ability to continue discussing Senator Kerry's qualifications for office—and in the Kerry campaign's effort to change the political agenda—each is dependent on a set of circumstances beyond their control. Just yesterday the Pentagon reported that seven more Americans had been killed in service to their country in Iraq, bringing the total dead to over 1000. Tensions in Iraq are extremely high. Vice President Cheney warned about the danger of a terrorist attack at home if he and President Bush were not reelected, causing a rapid response from not only Democrats but many Republicans as well. But the nation is well aware that such an attack could be attempted at any point. The progress of events in Iraq and elsewhere around the world and any terrorist actions against American citizens will have a tremendous effect on how the public responds to the presidential campaign. And, of course, such events are largely beyond the control of either candidate.