

## The Dog Days of August

I have been watching presidential campaigns for a long time. Some patterns are clear. During the “dog days of August,” a term usually reserved for that period of time when my beloved Red Sox fall out of the pennant race, presidential candidates retreat to some place more comfortable than the campaign trail. Not this year. Let’s look at the ways patterns have already been broken—and speculate on why.

First, usually the two parties’ conventions are separated by only two weeks or so, just enough time for the media (and now the security forces) to leave one locale and set up in another. This year the separation is five weeks. The “why” here is clear. The Republicans outsmarted the Democrats. Traditionally the party not controlling the White House has the first convention and the incumbent’s party, whether it is renominating a sitting president or choosing his successor, follows quickly. The Democrats, following this pattern, set their date. But the Republicans put their convention off, because they recognized that a candidate’s ability to spend privately raised money ends when he accepts public funding—and that the public funding provision takes effect when the candidate accepts the nomination. Thus, when John Kerry accepted the Democratic nomination and acknowledged that he would accept public funding for the general election campaign (as has been done by every major party candidate since the law went into effect in 1976), he had to stop spending the money his campaign had raised and budget the roughly \$75 million in public funding over the three months from his nomination to the November 2 election. The Bush-Cheney campaign can continue to spend the private money they have raised until they accept the nomination in New York, in early September. They will then be granted the same \$75 million, but they will spend it over a two-month period. Advantage: Bush-Cheney.

The Kerry-Edwards campaign had to respond to this situation, and that necessity led to the second way in which this campaign has broken the traditional mold. Usually the out-party nominee does some quick post-convention campaigning, to maximize the bounce in the public opinion polls they garner from exposure at their convention, and then they go into hibernation, to rest up for the fall campaign. This time, however, Kerry and Edwards and their families have been on the road constantly and will stay out their campaigning. Why? To offset the Republicans’ financial advantage. By running a relatively low-budget but high profile campaign for five weeks, the Kerry campaign is saving money and not disappearing from public view.

Look at what is happening. The Kerry caravan, on busses, boats, and trains, in winding its way through the battleground states, drawing huge crowds and—more importantly—a great deal of local television coverage. There are no Kerry-sponsored ads on television, but he is on television in the most important states nonetheless. In the meantime, the Democratic National Committee, working “independently” from the Kerry campaign, is running enough ads, in those states and others, to maintain some visibility. The DNC ads reinforce the theme of the convention, that Kerry is ready to serve and to defend the country.

The Democratic strategy had led to the third instance in which this campaign differs from previous ones—an incumbent president is on the campaign trail at a time when most are resting up for their convention, at their convention, or basking in the post-nomination adulation of party leaders. The Bush-Cheney ticket is not only on television with their ad campaign, the President and the Vice President are out on the campaign trail, in the same states in which Kerry and Edwards are campaigning. Their strategists do not feel that their campaign can afford to give Kerry the kind of boost an unanswered personal appearance might give him in those states.

So the campaign has started in earnest much earlier than is normally the case, and it will continue unabated until November 2. There is yet another difference between this campaign and most previous ones, the ones we discuss in Chapter 9. In this campaign the key issue is clearly foreign policy, defined now as the policy of the war in Iraq and the ability to combat terrorism. Normally an incumbent president at a time of war has a huge advantage in such a situation. In

2004, however, the Democrats have not conceded that advantage. They are playing up Senator Kerry's war record (and certain Republican-backed organizations are attempting to denigrate it). They are questioning whether the President has led us in the right direction, in the right way.

Look carefully at the public opinion polls that seem to come out every day. Do not just focus on the "horse race," who is ahead. Look at the so-called "internals," what is behind the headline numbers. Each of the media polls has asked a series of questions about which candidate is better prepared to lead us in the war on terrorism, about the public's reaction to the President's handling of the war in Iraq, about general perceptions of the two candidates' strengths and weaknesses on foreign and defense issues. The winner may well be determined by who does better on these numbers. In recent weeks, Senator Kerry has made some inroads, but nothing is yet determined. And, as has often been the case in the past, the winner may be determined by events beyond either candidate's control and the ways in which the nation responds to them.

One final note. Those of you who have been following the campaign this week have undoubtedly seen the ad put out by the group called "Swift Boat Veterans for Truth." It is an anti-Kerry ad, paid for by a so-called "527 group," named for the section of the Internal Revenue Service code that allows for the establishment of such groups, for them to raise money in large contributions, and to spend the money for political purposes, so long as they do not coordinate with a candidate's campaign. (Move-on.org, a liberal organization, is another example of a 527 organization.) "Swift Boat Veterans for Truth" is funded largely by one individual who is a friend of the President and who has been a major donor to previous Bush campaigns—and it is all perfectly above board. The ad they have been running is very controversial, with criticism coming not only from Democrats but also from prominent Republicans such as Senator John McCain. What are we to make of it? One way to judge the ad is to look at the facts behind the allegations. To do so for this ad and for the others that will appear throughout the campaign, we suggest you do to [www.factcheck.org](http://www.factcheck.org), a web site maintained by the Annenberg Fact Check Project, funded by the Pew Charitable Trusts as a means of keeping politicians accountable for their own words and those said on their behalf. It is well worth your time.