

Unusual Factors in the 2004 Presidential Campaign

July 14. Two weeks before the Democrats convene in Boston. Six weeks before the Republican National Convention meets in New York. And already we see some unique and other highly unusual elements of the 2004 presidential campaign. What are some of the unusual factors that we should follow?

Every observer assumes this election is going to be extremely close. That is hardly unique, and it is unlikely that this election will be as close as that in 2000. But with each poll showing a near dead heat between President Bush and Senator Kerry, it is important to look behind the numbers. Two results have recurred in poll after poll in recent weeks. The most striking result is that a vast majority of the voters—Democrats and Republicans—are firmly committed to their present choice. In the most recent poll released by the *Washington Post*, as an example, nearly 80% of the supporters of each presidential candidate say they are firmly committed to that choice; another 10% or so say they are unlikely to change. Those numbers are significantly higher than similar numbers even four years ago.

The second result that is striking is that President Bush's approval rating has been consistently below 50% in virtually all polls for a number of weeks. The President's approval rating is one of the two factors that political scientists have found is the best predictor of who will win the election. If the President falls below 48%—as the President has in a number of polls—he is in trouble. However, the other factor that political scientists use as a predictor of electoral outcome is the state of the economy six months before an election. By that measure, President Bush is in good shape.

These two factors normally point in the same direction. What are we to make of this divergence? Put simply, the war in Iraq and the threat of terrorism are defining this election for many voters. And we should watch the effect of both of those closely throughout the fall. If the interim government in Iraq is succeeding, the President's numbers and his chances of winning should rise. If the government falters, the President will be in more trouble.

How the citizenry reacts to any change in the terrorist threat to the United States will also have an effect, though what effect is less clear. No one—and certainly not the two of us—wants to speculate on what would happen if another terrible attack on the United States took place. But such an event—or concerns raised about more attacks without their occurring—would have an impact on the election, and we should watch that as well.

Also unusual in the early stages of this campaign is the extent to which a sitting president is engaged in on-the-road campaigning. President Bush has just toured the Midwest, hitting some of the key battleground states, including two he lost in 2000 that he hopes to win in 2004. He has been busy attacking the Democratic team—on questions of values, on inconsistencies in Senator Kerry's voting record, on the choice of a trial lawyer as the running mate. He is doing this for strategic reasons, to redefine the election away from the war in Iraq and other issues that the Democrats are stressing. Presidential reelection campaigns are most often about the record of the President. The Bush campaign wants more of the electoral lens to focus on the challengers.

But remember at whom this lens is directed. Most of the electorate has already made up their minds, as we discussed above. As a result, the strategies of the two camps—the Democrats as well as the Republicans—must have two goals. First, to activate their base, that is to make sure that their supporters turn out to vote. President Bush’s emphasis on conservative social values to Republican audiences is directed at this group. So too is the Kerry-Edwards’s emphasis on the values they stress—hard work, opportunity, not giving tax breaks to the wealthy. The second goal is to appeal to that small number of voters who remain undecided. Politics is more art than science. The art here is to pitch your message so that it activates your base without alienating those who are still deciding. Watch the campaigns’ messages with this goal in mind.

Finally, for you trivia buffs, another unusual, though not unique, feature of this election is that the Democrats nominated a presidential and vice presidential candidate with the same first name—the first time that has happened since the Republicans nominated Charles Evans Hughes and Charles Fairbanks in 1924. Hughes and Fairbanks lost to President Woodrow Wilson and Vice President Thomas R. Marshall by only 23 electoral votes. We hope you all also remember the statement for which Vice President Marshall is most often remembered, “There once were two brothers named Marshall. One went off to sea, and the other became vice president of the United States. Nothing was ever heard of either of them again.”