

Meeting Expectations

October 21. I have been struck by the extent to which the media plays up expectations—in two of the worlds that are most important to me. Let's start with the positive scenario, the won in which expectations were met. Clearly the Red Sox-Yankees rivalry is one of the greatest in professional sports. The lead-up to any Yanks-Sox series, much less an American League Championship Series, defines hype. And for the last week, expectations were met. Baseball fans around the country witnessed an amazing series, full of highs and lows, heroes and goats, emotions of every kind, and—sorry, Yankees fans—redemption at the end. For baseball fans, it does not get better than that. And, frankly, that is what consumed me all of last week.

There is an old adage in politics that the election season really does not begin until after the World Series. If this year's series goes the full seven games, the election would not hit full stride until the Sunday before election day. So much for old adages. We know that the election is at full throttle and garnering a great deal of interest—at least in battleground states. But what about expectations in politics?

When we discussed the presidential nominating process in chapter 8, we noted that candidates for their party's nomination must meet certain expectations, set by the press, in order to stay viable. One of the key roles of the press throughout a campaign is to set expectations, as we discussed in chapter 10. They set expectations for finishes in primary elections, for money raised by certain (somewhat arbitrary) dates, for performance in debates, for responses to charges, and so on. They judge the candidates—for President and for other offices—based on the ways in which the candidates meet their expectations. We as citizens do as well. In 2000, neither candidate met expectations, and the citizens had to decide between two contenders, neither of whom they were happy with. With less than two weeks to go before this presidential election, many citizens are still determining whether this year's candidates meet their expectations.

And what are those expectations? They have been expressed in various ways, usually in terms of how President Bush and Senator Kerry respond to threats against the United States. We expect a leader to be strong, forceful, resolute, and successful. Senator Kerry is facing the test of whether he is a strong enough leader; does he have what it takes to lead this nation to war when that is necessary? For many voters, the verdict is still out. President Bush clearly passes that test, but for many of the same voters the verdict is out on the other expectation—does he understand the world in a sophisticated enough way to lead us to victory? As one commentator put it, we worry whether Kerry can pull the trigger; we worry whether Bush can shoot straight. And the undecideds are waiting for something in the last days of the campaign to tell them which candidate can meet their expectations.

In this year's political season two other sets of expectations are not being met. First, the media has failed the public. The media, until the most recent days, has failed the expectation of helping the public sort through the fog of claims and counterclaims. Citizens cannot be experts on all subjects. If the candidates are presenting conflicting claims—so that one must be wrong if the other is right—the media has the obligation to lead the citizens through the debate. This is a difficult role, but it is too important to be left to websites like FactCheck.org; it is one the mainstream media should play, that we have a legitimate expectation that they will play, in a fair and balanced way.

Second, the pollsters have not met our expectations. Polling is presented to us as an exact science. And it is an exact science, but it is one that has evolved and developed new techniques over the years. Pollsters have had to respond to changes in the political and social landscape. In this year's polling, these professionals have had to deal with an interesting sets of changes—more citizens using cell phones as their principle telephone (and cell phones are not called by polling organizations), more people refusing to answers pollsters' questions (partly through fatigue at being called), more new registrants than ever before (with subsequent difficulty in determining likely voters). Each pollster has handled these questions differently—according to their best professional judgments. The result has been a series of conflicting poll results, presented—until the last few days—without any explanation to the attentive public. In Thursday's *New York Times*, Pew's chief pollster, Andrew Kohut, says the problem is not with the pollsters but with an unstable electorate. Wrong! In mid-summer these same pollsters were saying how stable the electorate was, that the election would be decided by a very few voters who had not yet hardened on their positions. You cannot have it both ways. We expect more from these professionals, and their post-election self-examination should admit this.

We are now on the eve of a great election, one that might well set the course for our country from decades to come. In watching these last weeks, you should look to see the extent to which your expectations of the electoral process are met.