

Sweep or Split?

Among the punditry, two schools of thought have emerged about the coming elections. One holds that President George W. Bush is a shoo-in for reelection and that there is a strong possibility of, in the words of conservative columnist Tony Blankley, a “perfect storm” sweeping in Republican candidates on all levels. The alternative view is that the electorate has not changed since November 2000 and is still evenly split between the two parties. Obviously, one camp will be proven right and the other wrong, but it is not at all apparent at this juncture which school will come out on top.

Landslide or Wishbone Ahead?

The former view relies on the premise that September 11, 2001, was a transformational event and that Bush’s handling of terrorism and subsequent attacks on Afghanistan and Iraq will be favorably remembered in the polling booth. Proponents of this view, such as Republican pollster Bill McInturff, argue that a combination of Bush’s strength on foreign policy and terrorism and a lack of Democratic credibility on these issues could result in a landslide reelection for the president. Other proponents of this argument suggest that Republican victories in 2002 disprove the partisan split of 2000 and that the Republican Party is on the ascendancy. Supporters believe that the combined stimulus of the three Bush tax cuts, historically low interest rates, and an enormous level of federal government spending will push the economy out of the current slump in time to win the electorate. A corollary to this

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view, most forcefully argued by conservative activist Grover Norquist, is that congressional redistricting as well as emerging voting patterns on the congressional district and state levels are likely to expand Republican majorities, thereby ensuring GOP dominance for at least the rest of the decade.

The alternative view is that the country will remain evenly divided, that the 2004 presidential election will likely be extremely close, and that the economic and political climate could result in down-ballot losses for Republicans. It is a perspective held by many of the top Bush reelection campaign strategists, including Georgia Republican Party chairman and former Christian Coalition head Ralph Reed, among others, who saw Republican gains in 2002 as more a strategic and mechanical victory. These strategists attribute the 2002 successes to a strong Republican get-out-the-vote operation and highly effective visits by the popular Bush in key states in the closing days of the campaign, not a seismic shift to the right by the American people.

Central to this view is the feeling that, the further away we get from the attacks of September 11, the historic pattern of economic and domestic concerns dominating foreign policy issues will once again prove true and that Bush's foreign policy and national security credentials will be less influential in the election. Advocates of this argument also warn that, if we are in an economic recovery, it is a jobless recovery with productivity gains fueling the rebound but that an additional economic downturn remains possible between now and the next election.

The numbers provide insight into these perspectives. Bush's approval ratings, which surged to 90 percent in Gallup polling in the aftermath of the September 11 attacks only to drift down to the high fifties before popping back up to 71 percent during the Iraq war, have been slowly edging downward since, to 58 percent in midsummer. An Ipsos/CPR poll also revealed a substantial cleavage in how the president's performance on specific issues has been seen. On "handling foreign policy issues and the war on terrorism," Bush enjoys a 60 percent approval rating (38 percent disapproval), three points above his overall approval level of 57 percent. On handling the economy, on the other hand, his approval is eight points lower, at a distinctly unimpressive 49 percent (49 percent disapproval), and his approval rating on handling "domestic issues like health care, education, the environment and energy" was eight points lower than the overall rating at 49 percent (48 percent disapproval). Under normal circumstances, approval ratings on economic and domestic issues below 50 percent for a president, at least at election time, would be the kiss of death, though a 60–61 percent overall approval rating at election time would be a sure-fire ticket to reelection.

If on election night voters collectively focus on foreign policy and national security, Bush will certainly get reelected, and it will be a good night

for Republicans down the ballot. If the focal point of the election is on the economy or on domestic problems, the race is more likely to be close. Republican hopes of expanding on their narrow House and Senate majorities would thus be in jeopardy, even if the majorities themselves are not.

Yet, circumstances have become more complicated in recent months. In the realm of foreign policy, neither Osama bin Laden nor Saddam Hussein has been found. Even if Iraq had some weapons of mass destruction (WMD), the credibility of the president and his administration on national security issues has been tarnished by the perception that the extent and the immediacy of the Iraqi WMD threat was grossly exaggerated by both the Bush administration and the government of British prime minister Tony Blair. Renewed hostilities in Iraq with, at one point, deaths of U.S. servicemen and women averaging one a day, as well as general problems in postwar occupation and reconstruction, further undercut the image of the unequivocal victory that existed in early May when the president declared an end to major hostilities in Iraq. Put simply, Bush's strong suit is not as strong today as it was immediately after September 11, 2001, or for that matter at the peak of the war, and it could get weaker still. Although it remains relatively high at 60 percent, the president's approval rating on foreign policy and terrorism has declined nine points in two months, demonstrating that mounting casualties in Iraq have begun to take their toll. Given the increasingly critical news media coverage of the administration (though certainly not even remotely as tough as that suffered by Blair in the United Kingdom), the potential for it to further impact his approval rating certainly exists. Although it is a big leap to suggest that foreign policy actually could become a liability for Bush, to say that his strength in that area has been undercut and could still be undercut further is not much of a stretch.

To put it differently, if the president's strong approval ratings on foreign policy are now effectively offsetting poor ratings on the economy and domestic problems, any significant erosion in public perceptions of Bush's performance in foreign policy is extremely problematic. Right now, the president's approval rating is resting on foreign policy; thus, he cannot afford any significant downturn on that measure, lest his problems in the economic and domestic areas come to dominate how he is perceived overall.

At the same time, however, the economy is sending distinctively mixed signals. Although we have seen consumer confidence, profits, and productivity rise, more troubling statistics have also emerged. For example, the increase in unemployment in June marked the highest jump since September

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11, 2001, and the jobless rate is the greatest in any point in nine years. Although most economists remain fairly bullish in their predictions for the economy by November 2004, they have been almost uniformly wrong for three years. Complicating matters further, surveys show that, although voters believe that Bush sincerely tried to turn the economy around with his tax cuts, more people question whether tax cuts in general and the president's tax-cut package in particular were the appropriate remedy for the economy's ailments. The perception that the tax cuts helped the wealthy much more than working or middle-class Americans is widespread; few are compelled by the argument that any significant tax relief has to help the wealthy because they are the ones paying the bulk of taxes.

Indeed, some in the Democratic Party now regret having fought Bush principally over the size and kind of tax cuts when perhaps they should have fought against a tax-cut-driven package overall. Some Democrats believe that the economic stimulus effort should have been a more traditional pump-priming package that increases immediate spending on public infrastructure, whether it be streets, highways, bridges, schools, or other public buildings. Surveys show that voters more immediately associate spending on such concrete and steel, bricks and mortar projects with job creation than they do tax cuts. Alas, this marks yet another example of the Democrats' failure to articulate a coherent and effective economic message in recent years. As one might guess, now that the hostilities in Iraq are over, foreign policy as a driver of voter attitudes has slipped and economic concerns have become more influential. A multiple regression analysis of Ipsos/CPR polling through midsummer reveals that perceptions of the president's performance on foreign policy and terrorism were the primary determinant in whether a voter was inclined to reelect Bush or vote against him from January through April. In May and June, however, the economy became an equal factor in that reelection decision, while other domestic issues trailed far behind.

Thus, the jury is still out on the 2004 election. That, in and of itself, does not dictate that Bush will lose reelection or even that it will be close but tends to undermine the case that the September 11 attacks and the recent wars were transformational events that make the 2004 election a *fait accompli*.

The 'Haves' and the 'Have-Nots' of the Democratic Nominees

Although the precise value of the Democrats' presidential nomination cannot yet be determined, the nine-person field of Democratic contenders has split into two distinct groups: five "haves" and four "have-nots."

Almost invariably, the candidate who raises the most money during the odd-numbered year—the one before the election—wins the nomination.

Once the onslaught of early caucuses and primaries begin, little time exists to raise additional money and resources. The “haves” are the five who have raised the most money and, in the case of four out of the five, are running in first, second, or third place in either the critical Iowa caucus or the New Hampshire primary. Senators John Kerry (Mass.) and John Edwards (N.C.) have raised the most money this year, each in the \$12–13 million range, followed surprisingly by former Vermont governor Howard Dean, who has pulled in a bit more than \$10 million, mostly in the second quarter in a burst that no one predicted. Representative Richard Gephardt (Mo.) and Senator Joseph Lieberman (Conn.) round out the five, each having raised approximately \$8 million. In addition to these figures, Kerry and Gephardt each transferred \$2–3 million from their Senate and House reelection war chests. Edwards has yet to do so, but he can.

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With the nomination likely to be settled before the voters in a majority of the states have a chance to cast a ballot, national polls are not a major factor, but Lieberman leads in those, helped in no small part by his widespread name recognition gained as Vice President Al Gore’s running mate in 2000. Recent polls have shown Gephardt likely to come out in first place in the Iowa caucus, scheduled for January 19, though surveys vary widely on the extent of his advantage, with Kerry and Dean vying for second and third place, while Lieberman runs fourth, and Edwards fifth. In New Hampshire, with its primary slated for January 27, Kerry has run in first place in polls conducted thus far, with Dean in second place and gaining. Depending on the poll, either Gephardt or Lieberman are in third and fourth places, with Edwards rounding out the pack. Keep in mind that the seven most recent Republican presidential nominees each won either the Iowa caucus or the New Hampshire primary, or both, as well as six of the most recent seven Democratic nominees. Since 1976, that only exception for the Democrats has been Bill Clinton in 1992. That year, Senator Tom Harkin of Iowa made his home state’s caucus a moot event. In New Hampshire, Massachusetts senator Paul Tsongas’s next-door-neighbor status and, a week before the primary, Gennifer Flowers’s press conference alleging a sexual affair with Clinton undoubtedly contributed to making it the exception.

The have-nots, Senator Bob Graham (Fla.), Representative Dennis Kucinich (Ohio), former Senator Carol Moseley Braun (Ill.) and Reverend Al Sharpton of New York, have raised little money between them and have shown no discernable political progress in polls either in the critical early

states of Iowa or New Hampshire or in national polls. There has been some talk that the field of nine could actually expand, with Senator Joseph Biden (Del.) and retired Gen. Wesley Clark of Arkansas jumping into the fray. Although many have joked about the large size of this field, by historical standards it is not that unusual; indeed, in the summer of 2000, ten Republicans sought the GOP nomination.

A three- or four-seat Senate gain for the GOP would reduce legislative compromise.

Most political analysts discount the ability of such a late entry into the race because the most experienced campaign organizers, managers, and fundraisers have already chosen sides and have been hired by other candidates. Further handicapping the field is the fact that most political and journalistic insiders generally say that the most likely Democratic nominee will be either Kerry or Gephardt.

They believe the race will boil down to an outsider, Dean, facing off against an insider, most likely Kerry or Gephardt, with the insider more likely than not prevailing. A cautionary note: Edwards has raised an enormous amount of money, and his raw talent could develop in time to surge him ahead politically. Dean has also been consistently underestimated politically and financially in this campaign, though the smart money is still betting against his nomination.

Senate Democrats Forced into Retirement?

Even in Washington, House and Senate elections are getting very little attention, but with the 51 Republican–49 Democrat Senate, there is a great deal of attention over what might happen. If the Democrats were to catch every break, they could perhaps hold their losses down to just a single seat, although their strategists still keep a candle lit for a one-seat gain. If the breaks go the other way, Republicans could easily score a three- or perhaps a four-seat gain, giving them 54 or 55 seats in the chamber.

This is driven in part by the fact that Democrats have 19 seats at risk next year, compared to just 15 for the GOP. More problematic for Democrats is that 10 of the 19 seats they are defending are in states carried by Bush in 2000, while just 3 of the Republicans' 15 seats are in states won by Gore that year. This is critical because a fairly strong relationship exists between presidential and Senate voting behavior in states, so to prevail, candidates from the party that lost a particular state in the most recent presidential election usually need to be either extraordinarily qualified or facing a weak or deeply flawed candidate from the other party.

Democrats also face a problem with open seats, which are usually much harder to defend than those with incumbents. At this writing, there have been only two announced Senate retirements, Zell Miller (D-Ga.) and Peter Fitzgerald (R-Ill.), but Democrats could have as many as five more, each in states carried by Bush.

In short, there are a large number of very vulnerable or potentially vulnerable Democratic seats and a very small number of vulnerable seats for Republicans. This doesn't mean that Democrats will lose three or four or even more seats but that the potential downside risk of losses for Democrats is significantly greater than it is for the GOP. The most likely outcome at this stage would be a Democratic loss of between one and three seats, a loss of two being the most probable.

Although a party does not have true control of the Senate without 60 reliable votes, the lack of anything remotely approaching a conservative majority in the Senate has meant that conservative administration proposals or House bills would face either significant compromise or death in the Senate. A three- or four-seat gain for the GOP, putting them up to 53 or 54, would not dramatically change the legislative picture but would significantly change the chemistry of the institution and reduce the degree of legislative compromise.

Redistricting Challenges in the House

In the House, where Republicans hold a 229-206 advantage, there have been few major developments, with none being more important than the possibility of a remapping of the Texas districts that could cost Democrats as many as a half-dozen seats. After each decennial census and before the next election, each state is to redraw its congressional district boundaries though, quite often, political stalemate in the state legislature results in an inability to agree on a new map. Under such circumstances, the maps are drawn by the courts.

This year, Republicans in Colorado took advantage of state legislative gains in the November 2002 elections, redrawing that state's court-drawn lines to protect a freshman incumbent who had just won the narrowest House victory in the nation in a district designed to be evenly split between the two parties, making it decidedly more Republican. In Texas, emboldened by 2002 legislative gains as well, Republicans in the state legislature have now embarked on an attempt to redraw the court-drawn map there. That could make Democratic hopes of taking over control of the House even more difficult for the rest of this decade. Republicans argue that each state has the right, indeed the obligation, to draw its own map and that, if a court

draws it, the state legislature has the right to go back, even if after a subsequent election, and make a new one. Democrats retort that no state for at least 100 years has done this and that, after the first election after the census, only court-ordered redrawings are permissible. Democrats may retaliate elsewhere, most likely in New Mexico, if Republicans persist, though the damage would still be done.

The 2004 elections are surrounded more by uncertainty than anything else.

With Republicans currently holding a 12-seat advantage over Democrats, and with perhaps three dozen competitive seats next year, roughly half Democratic and half Republican, Democrats would need to win about 75 percent of all of the competitive races to take the majority—a very, very tall order in the absence of a major tidal wave. The redistricting process has resulted in a markedly smaller

playing field of seats that could turn over, leaving the overwhelming number of districts safely in one party's control or the other. Should Democrats suffer a net loss of five or six seats as a result of these new remappings, to say that only a tidal wave election could pull them back into a majority between now and the end of the decade is not all that much of an exaggeration.

Conclusion

The 2004 elections are surrounded more by uncertainty than anything else. Will foreign policy and concerns about terrorism dominant the electorate's decisionmaking process, or will it be concerns about the economy or domestic issues? Will the situation in Iraq stabilize or devolve into a quagmire? Will the economy rebound, double-dip down, or perhaps muddle along, roughly the way it is today? Will major acts of terrorism occur against this country between now and the election, and if so, what impact might they have? The possibility, if not the promise, of a close presidential race and the chance but not the inevitability that Republicans can build majorities in the House and Senate all remain unknowable at this stage.