

## Political Déjà Vu, but Will It Be 2000 or 1992?

Although the Democratic and Republican National Conventions will not take place until later this summer, the 2004 presidential election field is set, and the general election campaign is well under way. In many ways, Republican President George W. Bush and Democratic Senator John Kerry of Massachusetts are fighting on the same playing field that Bush and then-Vice President Al Gore fought in 2000. Of course, that year Gore won the popular vote by one-half of 1 percent—48.4 percent for Gore, 47.9 percent for Bush—but lost the Electoral College balloting by 5 votes—271 for Bush, 266 for Gore. The president's 537-vote margin of victory in Florida provided his win in the Electoral College. The only real logistical difference this year is that, as a result of the decennial reapportionment process, if Bush were to win all the states that he won in 2000, he would have 7 more electoral votes, giving him a 278 to 260 win in the Electoral College.

Of course, even though the playing field is largely the same, the political climate and the candidates' profiles have changed a great deal since November 2000. Bush is now an incumbent president with four years in the Oval Office under his belt. Kerry is not the vice president, but he also is not handicapped by having served closely with a president whose record in office had been tarnished by both scandal and innuendo. The economy slid into a recession and has since emerged. Bush's tax cuts have successfully stimulated the economy, but the upturn has corresponded with steps taken by corporate leaders who seem willing to go to great lengths not to add any more workers to their payrolls than is absolutely necessary, thus limiting the benefits of the recovery largely to the shareholder class—large and growing as it is.

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Charles E. Cook Jr. writes weekly columns for *National Journal* and *CongressDaily AM*, published by the National Journal Group. He is a political analyst for NBC News and editor and publisher of the *Cook Political Report*, a Washington-based, nonpartisan newsletter analyzing U.S. politics and elections.

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**Somewhere between 16 and 19 states can be considered true battleground swing states...**

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Just as important, Americans view Bush very differently today than they did four years ago. In 2000, Bush was widely seen as a “compassionate conservative” focused on education, who spent an inordinate amount of time in schools reading to young children. In no way was he a polarizing figure, at least not on this side of the Atlantic. Today, however, Bush is every bit as polarizing as President Bill Clinton was in 2000. Indeed, a poll conducted by

the Gallup Organization on March 5–7, 2004, found that, whereas an astounding 91 percent of Republicans approved of the job Bush was doing in office, only a dismal 17 percent of Democrats did. This 74-point differential is the largest partisan gap in the assessment of a president’s performance in office in the long history of the Gallup Poll. For other presidents at this point in their first terms in office, the Gallup Poll pointed out that approval ratings had ranged from as low as a

20-point spread for Lyndon Johnson to a 55-point gap for Ronald Reagan and 56-point gap for Clinton. (The elder President George Bush had a 50-point gap at this stage of the game.)

This extraordinary level of polarization, coupled with the continued equal division between the number of Republicans and Democrats in the country, means that the upcoming presidential election will almost certainly be an extremely close one. Bush’s incredibly strong support among his fellow Republicans has constructed a very sturdy floor, or base of support, beneath him; at the same time, the adamant opposition he faces among Democrats has essentially created a low ceiling above him. If Bush were a stock, he would have a fairly narrow trading range. The even partisan division and the high degree of polarization mean that the days of Johnson’s 61.1 percent win over Senator Barry Goldwater (R-Ariz.) in 1964 or President Richard Nixon’s 60.7 percent victory over Senator George McGovern (D-S.D.) in 1972 will be extremely difficult to replicate. Even an outcome like former California governor Reagan’s 10-point margin of victory over President Jimmy Carter in 1980 is extremely unlikely. The expectation of a close, photo-finish race is so great among strategists and operatives in both camps that each side is waging its campaign as if this is the last election that will ever be held.

In December, after a foreign policy trifecta—Bush’s successful Thanksgiving Day trip to Iraq to meet with U.S. troops, the capture of Saddam Hussein, and the announcement that the United States and the United Kingdom had reached an agreement with Libya that resulted in that country’s decision to

dismantle its nuclear weapons program—plus a string of solid economic news, Bush was on a roll. The Gallup Poll's job approval rating soared from 50 percent to 63 percent just before the holidays, an astonishing jump and well outside his normal trading range. Just two weeks into the new year, however, Bush's numbers began to tumble not just down to their mid-November low of 50 percent but to a mere 48 percent—the president's lowest rating to date.

The pounding that Bush then sustained from Democratic presidential contenders campaigning in Iowa and New Hampshire was relentless and effective. As Kerry emerged from the primaries with the Democratic nomination assured, various polls gave him anywhere from a 7- to 12-point lead over Bush. Ralph Nader's entry into the contest, along with a very effective Bush counterattack against Kerry in early and mid-March, essentially leveled the race again, although the impact of the highly controversial book by former National Security Council adviser on counterterrorism, Richard Clarke, remains to be seen in the polling data. In short, the race for the presidency will likely continue to seesaw like this from now until November 2.

**...to narrow the list a bit further to the most hotly contested, watch nine.**

## **The Swing States**

Depending on which strategist or analyst one talks to, somewhere between 16 and 19 states can be considered true battleground swing states. The broadcast networks' famous red and blue maps, to indicate which states cast their ballots for Republicans and Democrats, respectively, now have a new look. In 2004, "purple" states are now depicted—those that could go either way—in addition to red and blue states where Republicans and Democrats are strong.

To appreciate the geographical layout of the swing states, it helps to visualize a map of the United States. Start with the Great Lakes region, where almost every state that touches one of the lakes is up for grabs—except New York and Illinois, both of which will almost certainly go blue to the Democrats, and Indiana, which just as assuredly will go red. Pennsylvania, Ohio, Michigan, Minnesota, and Wisconsin are all purple. From there, go northwest and color Oregon and Washington purple; head southwest, adding Nevada and New Mexico; in the Midwest, pick up Iowa, Missouri, and Arkansas; move southeast and add Florida; proceed up the East Coast to include West Virginia; and finally up to New England for Maine and New Hampshire.

There you have the 16 states that virtually everyone would agree to characterize as swing. Early in the campaign, some Democrats put Arizona on the list; the Bush campaign appeared to signal that it agreed by adding Arizona to its list for first-round positive advertising in early March along with the other 16 official swing states. Delaware was added to the list in the first round of negative Bush-Cheney ads. Some strategists also put Louisiana into the mix.

When it comes to the South, Democrats constantly seem to proclaim the importance of the party carrying at least a few states. Politically speaking, Florida is not a southern state. My view, however, is that, with the exception of Arkansas and possibly Louisiana, Democrats could not carry any other state in the region even if they had Confederate Gen. Robert E. Lee at the top of the ticket.

### Florida's demographic changes since 2000 favor the Democrats.

To narrow the list of swing states a bit further to the most hotly contested, watch nine: four states that Bush won in 2000 and five that Gore won. The four Bush states likely to see the hardest fight are Florida, Missouri, New Hampshire, and Ohio.

Florida makes the list for obvious reasons. It is worth remembering, however, that Florida now has a greater number of Democratic-voting Puerto Ricans, Mexican-Americans, and Dominicans than it has Republican-voting Cubans. Additionally, the president's approval numbers among voters over age 65 are waning. Republicans are hopeful that the strong job growth that Florida has enjoyed during the last three years will insulate the GOP from these other demographic factors.

Keep in mind that Missouri has voted for the winning presidential candidate in every presidential election except one since 1900, with the single exception being the 1956 race between Dwight D. Eisenhower and Adlai Stevenson. Missouri is as close to a political microcosm of the country as there is—and it is close. In 2000 the presidential, Senate, and gubernatorial victors won by three percentage points or fewer. New Hampshire, once a staunchly conservative, Republican state, is becoming less Republican and more independent every year. Its character is profoundly changing, and 56 percent of its residents today were not born there. New Hampshire has thus very much become a swing state. Finally, Ohio, which Bush won by just more than three percentage points in 2000, has lost 225,000 manufacturing jobs since he took office, putting the state even more in play than it was during the last presidential election.

As for "Gore" states to watch this time around, especially up for grabs are Minnesota and Wisconsin in the upper Midwest as well as New Mexico,

which Democrats carried by only 366 votes in 2000. Given that Bush runs unusually strong for a Republican among Mexican-American voters, New Mexico is hardly a slam dunk for Democrats. Oregon and Washington can also be added to the list.

## **Upcoming for Congress**

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The congressional races are another matter. That Republicans will retain control of the House of Representatives is almost certain, yet the Republican Party's fight for the Senate might be showing signs of erosion. Republicans' chances of maintaining their majority are now between 60 percent and 70 percent, down from a range of 80–90 percent just a few months ago. Senator Ben Nighthorse Campbell's (R-Colo.) decision to retire jolted Republicans because he had been considered a near shoo-in for reelection to a chamber that is currently split, 51 Republican seats to 49 Democratic ones.

In several other states where Republicans should be heavily favored, things are not going as well as might be expected. In Alaska, appointed GOP Senator Lisa Murkowski was already gearing up for a tough race against the former two-term Democratic governor, Tony Knowles. It now appears that Murkowski will face a competitive primary challenge from the former president of the state Senate, Mike Miller, which will serve to sap time and resources away from the general election contest.

In Oklahoma, Republicans face a three-way primary among the former mayor of Oklahoma City, Kirk Humphreys; the state corporation commissioner, Bob Anthony; and former representative Tom Coburn. The differences between the candidates are not necessarily ideological; rather, they reflect disagreement among state party leaders. One group led by Senator Jim Inhofe (R) believes that the party is best served by rallying around one candidate, in this case, Humphreys. Other political state leaders feel that anointing a candidate does not guarantee that the party will run the strongest challenger. Regardless of which candidate emerges with the nomination, he will face the Democratic candidate, Representative Brad Carson, a moderate with a solid geographical base.

Finally, South Carolina Republicans are hosting a six-way primary that is beginning to turn negative as the candidates vie for the front-runner slot. On the Democratic side, the state's superintendent of education, Inez Tenenbaum, does not face a primary and is taking advantage of the turmoil on the Republican side to establish her campaign base. South Carolina is the most Republican of the southern states, but Tenenbaum is a strong candidate who has taken positions that appeal to some Republican voters, such as her support for a constitutional amendment banning same-sex marriage. In

addition, even though South Carolina's congressional race should be an easy opportunity for Republicans to pick up a seat currently held by a Democrat, it looks like the GOP will be locked in a competitive race for the nomination.

Even in the House of Representatives, where loss of Republican control is nearly impossible in the upcoming election, Democratic hopes of capitalizing on a gain resulting from a special election in Kentucky and a potential win in South Dakota on June 1 are matched with intriguing possibilities elsewhere, such as newly open seats in the Louisiana and Washington state delegations. It is an open question, however,

whether Democrats can score enough GOP turnovers to offset the expected losses in Texas, after the breathtaking redistricting that took place there.

Still, the biggest impediment to Democrats is that more than 90 percent of House districts are currently not competitive. At this point, only 36 seats can be listed as competitive. Currently, 15 Republican seats are in any kind of jeopardy—4 are toss-ups and

the other 11 lean toward the Republican Party. Democrats have 19 seats in danger—12 lean toward Democrats and 7 are toss-ups. The other two potential toss-ups are both in new seats from Texas: in the Nineteenth District, where Representatives Randy Neugebauer (R) and Charlie Stenholm (D) are running, and in the Thirty-Second District, where Representatives Pete Sessions (R) and Martin Frost (D) face off. To win control of the House, Democrats would need to win 31 of these 36 districts, or 86 percent of the most competitive races. That level of victory is a very tall order for any party in anything short of the unlikely event of a "tsunami election"—one in which a tidal wave sweeps one party's candidates into office up and down the ticket.

**Republicans will almost certainly retain control of the U.S. House of Representatives...**

### **Déjà Vu? Is It 2000 or 1992?**

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That brings us back to the presidential race. Adding to the fascinating complexity of the upcoming 2004 election is an eerie similarity between this particular election campaign and the 1992 contest, when the elder Bush was defeated by Arkansas governor Clinton. The Bush-43 White House clearly has strived not to repeat the mistakes made by the Bush-41 administration, with the greatest attention being paid to not alienating conservatives—the party's base—the way the president's father, who had never truly bonded

with the party's Right, did when he broke his "no new taxes" pledge. Today, some conservatives have misgivings over the younger Bush's support for immigration reform and rising deficits, but polls show that support for the president among this group is quite solid.

Instead, it is the mistakes that many think were most crucial in the first Bush administration—being seen as out of touch, uncaring, and ineffectual on the economy—that seem to be repeating themselves. The current administration put all its economic eggs in the tax-cut basket. Although this economy has been stimulated in almost every way imaginable, by tax cuts, lower interest rates, a cheap dollar, and incredibly high levels of government spending, little has been done on public works spending and other job-creation programs that voters consider important. As conservatives become increasingly uncomfortable with an exploding federal budget deficit, it is getting more difficult to implement many of the public works job-creation programs that would have been an automatic response to high unemployment in past years.

Two dynamics are at work here. First, as the shape of the economy changes, the job losses have not been cyclical but structural. It always takes significantly more time to replace these structural job losses because new jobs often have to come from newly created companies or industries. Second, American workers are even less competitive than workers abroad because the gap between total costs of benefits (such as health care programs and pensions) and actual wages or salaries is now the widest in history. In other countries, such costs are often shouldered by the government rather than by employers. It is little wonder that U.S. employers are going to enormous lengths, such as allowing more overtime, utilizing more temporary workers, and outsourcing jobs both domestically and to offshore companies, to avoid taking on the obligation of hiring new workers and the expenses that flow from doing so.

Although these problems, along with globalization's normal growing pains, would exist regardless of who occupied the White House, the president's single-minded focus and reliance on tax cuts, with barely a nod to the much more complicated economic situation, make him appear increasingly out of touch with the economy. In short, the president's approach to the economy makes him look much like his father.

On the foreign policy side of the equation—an area that most assuredly was a positive factor for the elder Bush—the debate continues over whether

**...but the Republican Party's fight for the Senate might be showing signs of erosion.**

the president's decision to go to war with Iraq was appropriate; whether his administration, the Clinton administration, or both are to blame for not anticipating and thwarting the September 11 attacks; and how effective the administration's efforts to eradicate Al Qaeda have been since that time. From the standpoint of domestic politics, the key questions are whether the situation in Iraq gets better or worse between now and the November 2 election, whether U.S. casualties in Iraq increase or decrease, and what effect both factors will have on public opinion in the United States.

All these outcomes are unknowable at this stage, but it will make for high political drama this summer through the conventions and into the stretch run of the campaigns in the fall.