

A Kerry Landslide?

Why the next election won't be close.

By Chuck Todd

Over the last year, most political TV shows handicapping the upcoming presidential election have repeated the refrain that the race will be extremely tight. Last month, CNN's astute commentator Jeff Greenfield hosted an entire segment on how easily this election could turn out like 2000, with President Bush and Sen. John Kerry splitting victories in the popular vote and the electoral college. Greenfield even threw out the possibility of an electoral college split of 269-269, brought about by a shift of just two swing states that went for Bush last time, New Hampshire and West Virginia. He ended his feature with the conventional wisdom among Washington pundits: "We're assuming this election will stay incredibly close." Reporters covering the campaign echo this expectation, sprinkling their campaign dispatches with references to the "closely fought" electoral race and "tight election."

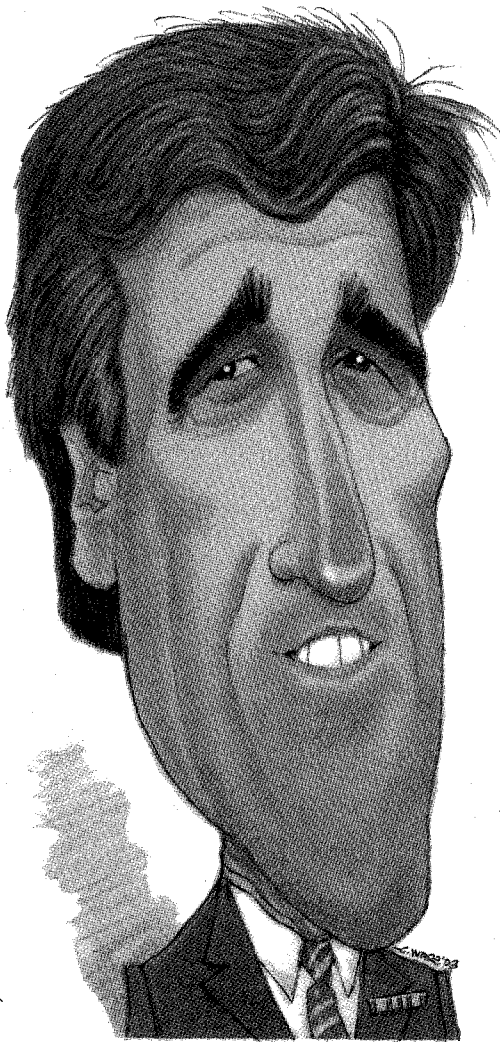
The campaign staffs themselves have been saying for months that they anticipate that the race will go down to the wire. In late April, Republican party chairman Ed Gillespie told *The New York Times* that he expected a "very, very close" race. This winter, Democratic party chairman Terry McAuliffe urged Ralph Nader not to enter the race, fearing that the perpetual candidate could take precious votes away from Kerry in a race sure to be won by a hairline margin.

There are perfectly understandable reasons why we expect 2004 to be close. Everyone remembers the nail-biting 2000 recount. A vast number of books and magazine articles describe the degree to which we are a 50/50 nation and detail the precarious balance between red

and blue states. And poll after poll show the two candidates oscillating within a few percentage points of one another. There are also institutional factors that drive the presumption that the race will be tight. The press wants to cover a competitive horse-race. And the last thing either campaign wants to do is give its supporters any reason to be complacent and stay home on election day.

But there's another possibility, one only now being floated by a few political operatives: 2004 could be a decisive victory for Kerry. The reason to think so is historical. Elections that feature a sitting president tend to be referendums on the incumbent—and in recent elections, the incumbent has either won or lost by large electoral margins. If you look at key indicators beyond the neck-and-neck support for the two candi-

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dates in the polls—such as high turnout in the early Democratic primaries and the likelihood of a high turnout in November—it seems improbable that Bush will win big. More likely, it's going to be Kerry in a rout.

Bush: the new Carter

In the last 25 years, there have been four elections which pitted an incumbent against a challenger—1980, 1984, 1992, and 1996. In all four, the victor won by a substantial margin in the electoral college. The circumstances of one election hold particular relevance for today: 1980. That year, the country was weathering both tough economic times (the era of “stagflation”—high inflation concurrent with a recession) and frightening foreign policy crises (the Iranian hostage crisis and the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan). Indeed, this year Bush is looking unexpectedly like Carter. Though the two presidents differ substantially in personal style (one indecisive and immersed in details, the other resolute but disengaged), they are also curiously similar. Both are religious former Southern governors. Both initially won the presidency by tarring their opponents (Gerald Ford, Al Gore) with the shortcomings of their predecessors (Richard Nixon, Bill Clinton). Like Carter, Bush is vulnerable to being attacked as someone

not up to the job of managing impending global crises.

Everyone expected the 1980 election to be very close. In fact, Reagan won with 50.8 percent of the popular vote to Carter's 41 percent (independent John Anderson won 6.6 percent)—which translated into an electoral avalanche of 489 to 49. The race was decided not so much on the public's nascent impressions of the challenger, but on their dissatisfaction with the incumbent.

Nor was Carter's sound defeat an aberration. Quite the opposite. Of the last five incumbent presidents booted from office—Bush I, Carter, Ford, Herbert Hoover, and William Howard Taft—only one was able to garner over 200 electoral votes, and three of these defeated incumbents didn't even cross the 100 electoral-vote threshold:

- 1992: 370 (Bill Clinton) to 168 (George H. W. Bush)
- 1980: 489 (Ronald Reagan) to 49 (Jimmy Carter)
- 1976: 297 (Jimmy Carter) to 240 (Gerald Ford)
- 1932: 472 (FDR) to 59 (Herbert Hoover)
- 1912: 435 (Woodrow Wilson) to 88 (TR) to 8 (Taft)

Poll sitting

Historically, when incumbents lose big, they do so for sound reasons: The public sees their policies as not working—or worse yet, as failures. That's certainly increasingly true of Bush today. From the chaos in Iraq to an uncomfortably soft economic recovery to the passage of an unpopular Medicare bill, the White House is having a harder and harder time putting a positive spin on the effects of the president's decisions.

And while Bush still retains a loyal base, he has provoked—both by his policies and his partisanship—an extremely strong reaction among Democrats. One indication is that turnout in this year's early Democratic primaries was way up. Nearly twice as many Democrats turned out for the 2004 Iowa caucuses as they had for those held in 2000. The turnout in New Hampshire for the Democratic primary was also extraordinarily high, up 29 percent from the previous turnout record set in 1992—the year Bush's father lost his reelection bid.

The Democrats' recent enthusiasm at the polls may in part be because this year's primary featured nine candidates, and Howard Dean's unusual campaign mobilized many new voters—both for and against him. However, the excitement in the Democratic race can't explain primary voter behavior on the other side of the aisle. Republican turnout in the New Hampshire primary was lower than in 2000, but that isn't surprising considering that Bush's nomination was never in question this year. A fairer way to gauge the eagerness of the president's base to rally behind him is to compare this GOP primary to the last one that featured an incumbent running for reelection with no real primary opposition: Bill Clinton in 1996. That year in New Hampshire, 76,874 Democrats cast ballots for Clinton. This year, 53,749 Republicans cast ballots for Bush.

This is especially astonishing, considering that, in New Hampshire, there are more registered Republicans than Democrats.

The most obvious evidence cutting against the historical trend of elections featuring incumbents being won or lost by large margins is that opinion polls have consistently shown Bush and Kerry running neck and neck. But look carefully, and you'll find a couple of nuances in the most recent poll data that point to the potential for a big Kerry win. First, in polls that implicitly assume a higher turnout, Kerry performs better than he does in other polls. Most of the polls you hear about—and the ones that prognosticators trust the most—are surveys of “likely voters.” Among the criteria pollsters typically use to identify likely voters is whether the subjects participated in the last election. These polls have proven more accurate in recent elections, like 2000, when voter turnout was relatively low—of the last nine presidential elections, only two showed lower turnout than 2000. But there are strong reasons to think that voters will turn out in larger numbers this year—especially among Democrats.

Four years ago, when the economy was strong, the country wasn't at war, and both presidential candidates ran as moderates, just 43 percent of adults told an early April Gallup poll that they had been thinking about the election “quite a lot.” This April, when the issues seem much bigger and the differences between the candidates much starker, Gallup found that 61 percent of adults said they had been giving “quite a lot” of thought to the election.

So, presuming higher turnout, an arguably better predictor of election results would be polls of registered voters—both those who voted and those who stayed home in 2000. In an early April Gallup poll, Kerry trailed Bush 46 percent to 48 percent among likely voters, but led 48 percent to 46 percent among registered voters. Kerry's support had dropped incrementally in a late April Gallup poll, but he continued to garner higher support among registered voters than likely voters.

The second nuance to look at is what political consultant Chris Kofinis calls “the Bush bubble”: the gap between the president's overall approval ratings and his approval ratings on specific policy areas. According to the most recent *Washington Post*/ABC News poll, Bush's approval rating now stands at 51 percent. That isn't bad, though it is noticeably below what the last two incumbents who won reelection had at this point in the election cycle: Reagan's approval was 54 percent and Clinton's was 56 percent. But even Bush's 51 percent may be

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softer than it looks. In the same poll, on seven of nine major policy issues—the economy, Iraq, Social Security, health insurance, taxes, jobs, the deficit—less than half of respondents said that they approved of the president's performance. In several cases, his approval was well below 50 percent. Only 45 percent approved of Bush's handling of Iraq; 44 percent

of his performance on the economy; 34 percent of his performance on the deficit; and 33 percent of his stewardship of Social Security. Even on policy areas in which the president's approval is now relatively high—education and the war on terror—he is vulnerable to later substantive attacks by Kerry. For instance, he currently garners 51 percent approval on education, due largely to his role in passing a bold education measure; increasingly, however, educators and the public are alarmed about the effects of No Child Left Behind.

Kerry's challenge

Of course, the tight polling data does reflect a fundamental reality: For all the fallout from his policies, Bush still appeals to many Americans because of his seeming decisiveness, straight talk, and regular-guy charm—not qualities that John Kerry prominently displays. The historical pattern may strongly suggest that if Kerry wins, it will be by large margins—but that is hardly fated. It will only happen if Kerry successfully highlights Bush's failings while showing himself to be an appealing alternative. Otherwise, the senator could see himself losing an electoral rout, not winning in one. In fact, the second most likely outcome of this election is a Bush landslide. With just one exception, every president to win a second consecutive term has done so with a larger electoral margin than his initial victory. The least likely result this November is another close election.

Right now, the president is vulnerable. As *The New Republic*'s Ryan Lizza argued in a recent *New York Times* editorial, undecided voters “know [the incumbent] well, and if they were going to vote for him, they would have already decided. Thus support for Mr. Bush should be seen more as a ceiling, while support for Mr. Kerry, the lesser-known challenger, is more like a floor.” That points to both an opportunity and a challenge for the Kerry campaign. Kerry needs to convince voters that he's up to the job—and that Bush isn't. If he can woo voters dissatisfied with Bush's policies, there's a potential—and historical precedent—for Kerry to win big. ♦

Bush's Secret Stash

Why the GOP war chest is even bigger than you think.

By Nicholas Confessore

Like the natural world, campaign finance is governed by inescapable laws of physics. One is that what goes up usually keeps going up: During every presidential election, the two parties manage to raise more money than they did the last time around. Another is that any given action rarely produces an equal and opposite reaction. Every four years, the GOP outraises and outspends the Democratic Party, usually by tens of millions of dollars.

