

The Curious and Close Presidential Campaign of 2000

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THE PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION OF 2000 BETWEEN REPUBLICAN Governor George W. Bush of Texas and Democratic Vice President Al Gore was the closest presidential election in American history, and there have been a number of very close presidential contests.¹ In the twentieth century, there was the controversial Kennedy–Nixon election of 1960, the surprising come-from-behind victory of Truman over Dewey in 1948, as well as Wilson’s razor-thin reelection over Hughes in 1916, the post-Watergate squeaker of 1976 and the turbulent Vietnam-era election of 1968. The later half of the nineteenth century also had several exceedingly close presidential contests, including the disputed Hayes–Tilden race of 1876 and the Cleveland–Blaine “rum, romanism, and rebellion” race of 1884.

Table 5.1 lists the closest presidential elections since 1828. They are ranked by the minimum vote change (as a percentage of the total national vote) that could have changed the election’s electoral vote winner. In each of these elections, a change in one or more states of less than two-tenths of one percent of the national vote would have changed the election’s result. The election of 2000 heads the list. A shift of fewer than a thousand votes in Florida, representing less than one-thousandth of one percent of votes cast nationwide, would have changed Florida’s electoral votes and, thereby, the national electoral vote winner. Even beyond Florida, there were a half dozen other states decided by razor-thin margins.

Table 5.1 The Most Narrowly Decided Presidential Elections, 1828–2000

<i>Election</i>	<i>Presidential Candidates</i>	<i>Electoral Vote Majority</i>	<i>Number of Votes</i>	<i>Minimum Vote Shift in States Necessary to Change the Electoral Vote Winner</i>	<i>As a Percentage of the National Popular Vote</i>	<i>Percentage of the National Popular Two-Party Vote for the Winning Candidate</i>
2000	Bush–Gore	2	269		0.001	49.73
1876	Hayes–Tilden	1	445		0.005	48.47
1884	Cleveland–Blaine	19	524		0.005	50.13
1916	Wilson–Hughes	12	1,711		0.009	51.64
1976	Carter–Ford	29	9,246		0.011	51.05
1960	Kennedy–Nixon	50	16,682		0.024	50.08
1948	Truman–Dewey	77	29,294		0.060	52.32
1888	Harrison–Cleveland	33	7,187		0.063	49.59
1844	Polk–Clay	33	2,554		0.094	50.75
1880	Garfield–Hancock	30	9,409		0.102	50.01
1848	Taylor–Cass	18	3,227		0.112	52.67
1896	McKinley–Bryan	48	18,558		0.133	52.19
1968	Nixon–Humphrey	79	145,559		0.199	50.40

Note: Elections are ordered by the minimum percentage of national vote that have to have shifted to change the election outcome. The first candidate in each pair won the election. The number of electoral votes required to change the election winner are the number of Electoral College votes that when added to the losing major party candidate's electoral vote totals would have produced an electoral vote majority. The minimum vote shift is the number of votes that would have changed state winners of electoral votes. For example, a 445 vote shift from Hayes to Tilden in South Carolina in 1876 would have swung that state from Hayes to Tilden and provided Tilden with more than the one additional electoral vote that he needed to win the election. Similarly, a shift of 9,409 votes from Garfield to Hancock in 1880 in four states would have shifted the electoral votes in those states to Hancock and provided him with at least the 30 votes that he needed for an electoral majority. The minimum popular vote shift as a percentage of the total national vote is in percentage points. Each of these percentages are less than one-fifth of one percentage point of the total national vote. For further details see table 8.2 in Campbell (2000, 172–3).

FOUR PHASES IN THE CAMPAIGN

Voters traveled a winding road to get to this near dead-heat election result. In examining the polls conducted throughout the campaign, there were four rather distinct phases. These are summarized in Table 5.2. As one might expect in such a close election, two of these periods in the campaign favored Bush and two favored Gore.

Although summer polls are notoriously volatile (Crespi 1988; Erikson and Wlezien 1998) and though poll leaders in the summer months are about as likely to lose as to win the election (Campbell 2000, 16), the 2000 polls conducted through the time of the Republican convention in August consistently indicated that Bush held a modest lead over Gore. This was somewhat surprising, in that Gore had an easier time than Bush in capturing his party's nomination. Gore's challenge from former senator Bill Bradley was not very damaging to Gore's candidacy. In contrast, Senator John McCain defeated Bush in several states and

Table 5.2 Four Phases of Campaign 2000

<i>Phase of Campaign</i>	<i>Candidate Advantaged in Phase</i>	<i>Poll Movement</i>	<i>Poll Leader</i>	<i>Typical Size of Lead</i>	<i>Possible Reason for Phase</i>
Pre-Convention through the Republican Convention	Bush	Stable for Bush	Bush Lead	About 55%	Party unity and enthusiasm
Democratic Convention	Gore	Sharp Shift to Gore	Gore Lead	52-54% range	Convention bump for the trailing candidate
October and The Debates	Bush	Trend to Bush	Bush Lead	52-54% range	Pressures of competition Debates affected Bush's image Diffused Democratic issues
The Close	Gore	Slight Trend to Gore	Dead-heat	Around 50%	Return to partisanship Split of late deciders

forced Bush to appeal to more conservative elements of the party in order to fend off the challenge. Nevertheless, Bush emerged from the nomination contest with a lead over Gore.

The second phase of the campaign occurred around the national conventions in mid-August. Despite a well-orchestrated (some might say overly managed) Republican convention, Gore surged in the polls and held a slight lead over Bush through September and into the first week of October.²

The series of three presidential and one vice-presidential debates in October made up the third phase in the campaign. Despite widespread speculation that the debates would favor Gore, Bush regained a slight lead.

The final phase of the campaign, the closing week or ten days, saw Bush's lead dwindle. On election day, the polls were divided. Some claimed that Bush held a narrow lead with likely voters while others had Gore with an edge. On election day all of the major polls had the race as too close to call. They were right. Even two weeks after the election, chin-deep in court cases and punch ballot chads in Florida, it remained unclear who the next president would be.

With all of the twists and turns in this campaign, how much of a difference did the net effects of the campaign have on the election's results? In a close election like 2000, anything can make the difference between winning and losing, and the campaign was certainly crucial. However, the net impact of the campaign in shifting votes one way or the other need not be great in order to have an impact. That, indeed, was the case in this campaign. If the campaign is defined as the period in July before the conventions until election day, the campaign shifted about three and a half percent of the vote toward Gore. Defining the campaign more narrowly as taking place from after the conventions until election day, it only shifted about one percentage point of the vote in favor of Bush.³ In short, despite the intensity of the campaign and its many ups and downs, the net effect on the vote was marginal. Nevertheless, in an election this close even marginal effects can prove decisive.

THE CONTEXT OF THE CAMPAIGN

Why did the 2000 campaign end in a near dead-heat? What explains the four phases in the campaign? Why did Bush take an early lead, only

to lose it to Gore after the Democratic convention? Why did Bush regain a lead with voters after the debates? Why did Gore close this lead in the final days of the campaign?

Presidential campaigns are often discussed as though they were a game. In one respect this trivializes campaigns. Unlike a mere game, presidential elections determine who serves as president, and this makes an important difference to how the nation is governed, and what public policies are adopted and this affects peoples' lives in many important ways. However, from another perspective, viewing the campaign as a game is apt. An election is a contest for votes and, like a card game, the outcome depends on what cards each candidate is dealt and how each candidate plays them: the context of the campaign and the decisions of the candidates' campaigns. Like a card game with good players, the course of the campaign is usually determined more by the context of the campaign (the cards dealt) than by the maneuverings and decisions made in the campaign (the play of the cards), but both matter, and this year crucial decisions were made during the campaign that may have made a significant difference to the results.

The Four Contexts

Several aspects of the context of the 2000 campaign indicated that it would be a close election, one strongly favored Gore and the Democrats, and another favored Bush and the Republicans.

First, a close campaign might have been expected since there was no incumbent running. As table 5.3 indicates, presidential elections tend to be closer when there is no incumbent in the race. Incumbents galvanize the public's verdict. Two out of every five elections with an incumbent in the race have resulted in landslides, usually in the incumbents favor (e.g., Johnson in 1964, Nixon in 1972, and Reagan in 1984) but sometimes against (e.g., Hoover's loss in 1932). If neither presidential candidate has the many advantages of incumbency, if they stand as equals before the electorate, the election tends to be closer. The odds of a near dead-heat election increase nearly five times if there is no incumbent president running (37% compared to 8%).

The second context driving the campaign toward a narrow margin was partisanship. Despite claims to the contrary and an unwillingness often to admit to it openly, the American electorate is highly partisan. Most American voters are partisans (about 90 percent) and most partisans

Table 5.3 Incumbency and Election Margins, 1828-2000

<i>Size of Popular Vote for the Winning Candidate (Two-party Vote Percentage)</i>	<i>No Incumbent in the Race</i>	<i>Incumbent was in the Race</i>
Near Dead-Heats (under 50% to 51.5%)	7 (37%)	2 (8%)
Competitive (51.6% to 57.5%)	8 (42%)	13 (52%)
Landslides (57.6% to 65.2%)	4 (21%)	10 (40%)
Total	19	25

Note: In "Near Dead-Heat" elections the victorious presidential candidate received a popular vote percentage below 51.5 percent of the popular two-party vote. In "Competitive" elections the winning presidential vote was between 51.6 and 57.5 percent of the two-party vote. In "Landslide" elections the winning candidate received more than 57.6 percent of the national two-party popular vote. The landslide elections without an incumbent in the race were 1836 (Van Buren versus Harrison), 1856 (Buchanan versus Frémont and Fillmore), 1920 (Harding over Cox) and 1928 (Hoover over Smith). The later two cases were both in a dominant Republican era. The two near dead-heats with incumbents were 1888 (the rematch of Harrison over Cleveland) and 1976 (Carter over Ford). Incumbents include presidents who succeeded to the office upon the death or resignation of a president. The non-incumbent races were 1868, 1876, 1880, 1884, 1896, 1908, 1920, 1928, 1952, 1960, 1968, 1988, and 2000.

(again about 90 percent) vote for their parties' presidential candidate. The campaign is an important mechanism for rallying partisans. After sometimes divisive nomination battles, the general election campaign sets intraparty differences in perspective and redirects attention to the larger differences that exist between the parties (Campbell 2001).

Partisanship in the 2000 election steered the election toward a close finish because the number of Democrats and Republicans in the electorate are now more evenly balanced than they were for many years. Table 5.4 presents the distribution of party identifiers in groups of four elections from 1952 to 1996. As the table indicates, from 1952 to 1980 there were many more Democratic party identifiers than Republican party identifiers among the voting public. Since 1984, this Democratic party advantage has been cut dramatically. Whereas Democrats had outnumbered Republicans by more than 15 percentage points, their lead has eroded to barely three points in recent years. With nearly as

Table 5.4 The Partisanship of American Voters, 1952-1996

<i>Elections</i>	<i>Mean Percentage of Reported Voters who are:</i>			<i>Party Gap</i>
	<i>Democrats</i>	<i>Independents</i>	<i>Republicans</i>	
1952-1964	54.6	6.9	38.5	+16.1
1968-1980	53.1	9.1	37.8	+15.3
1984-1996	47.8	7.4	44.9	+2.9

Source: Adapted from Table A.5 of Campbell (2000, 216).

Note: The percentages are computed from corrected National Election Study data. The data have been corrected for unrepresentativeness as reflected in discrepancies between the aggregate actual and the reported national presidential vote. Based on the findings of Keith et. al. (1992), reported independents who report a leaning toward one of the parties are counted as partisans of that party. The "Party Gap" is the percentage of voters who are Democrats minus the percentage who are Republicans.

many Republicans as Democrats among voters, all things being equal, neither candidate has an audience of voters either more hostile or more receptive than the other's.

While the open seat status of the election and the balance of partisanship were forces for a close election, the public's evaluation of the Clinton administration's record and the state of the economy strongly favored Vice President Gore. To a significant degree, voters are thought to react to the performance of the current administration, to vote retrospectively (Key 1966; Fiorina 1981; Erikson 1989). The electorate holds the presidential party accountable for the state of the nation and the economy. When things are going well, voters usually reward the in-party's candidates. When things are going poorly, voters normally punish the in-party's candidates. It is not that voters are necessarily voting their personal pocketbooks, but the economy and national conditions more generally affect the public's receptivity to the in-party's message. If conditions are good and the public is happy, they may give the in-party the benefit of the doubt. On the other hand, if conditions are not so good, voters may be looking for reasons to make a change.

By any measure, things were going quite well in 2000. This should have augured well for the Gore candidacy. Table 5.5 displays several indicators of national well-being and general evaluations of the in-party in the late spring of the last three presidential election years. The indicators are both general as well as more specifically economic and objective as well as subjective. According to each of the four indicators in

Table 5.5 National Conditions Leading into the Presidential Campaign, 1992–2000

<i>Pre-Campaign Indicators of National Conditions and Reactions to the In-Party</i>	<i>Elections</i>		
	<i>1992</i>	<i>1996</i>	<i>2000</i>
Average Economic Growth Rate in Previous Two Years (GDP through first quarter of the election year)	.5%	3.1%	4.6%
Rate Economic Conditions as Excellent or Good (April or May)	12%	30%	66%
Satisfied with “the way things are going in the United States” (April or May)	20%	37%	59%
Approval of Presidential Job Performance (May)	39%	55%	57%

Sources: The Gallup Poll, U.S. Bureau of Economic Analysis, and Congressional Quarterly Weekly Reports. The public opinion data are from surveys conducted in April or May of the election year. The economic growth rate in the average annual growth rate in the GDP from the first quarter of the second year of the president's term to the first quarter of the fourth year of the term.

table 5.5, conditions in 1996 were better than they were in 1992 and conditions in 2000 were better still. The percent of respondents in a Gallup survey willing to say the economy was good or excellent more than doubled from 1992 to 1996 and more than doubled again in 2000. The increases in those indicating satisfaction with “the way things are going” were of about the same order. Many other indicators suggested the same. There was no question as to how most voters would answer the question: “Are you better off today than you were four or eight years ago?”

Even presidential approval throughout 2000 remained at a high level. Despite the various scandals involving the administration and President Clinton's impeachment for misdeeds in the Lewinsky matter, the president's job approval rating in May stood at 57 percent. Normally, approval ratings over 50 percent are a good sign that the public is positively disposed toward the in-party.⁴ Given that the public's concerns about Clinton's personal character flaws may have dampened his approval numbers and this level of approval can only be read as a general public endorsement of the administration's tenure.

Of course, as a would-be successor to the incumbent rather than the incumbent himself, Gore might not be accorded the full credit that Clinton would have received for the state of the nation. A race with an

incumbent necessarily takes on a more retrospective focus than one without the incumbent.⁵ Nevertheless, as the candidate of the in-party and as the sitting vice president who had demonstrated great loyalty to the president, it could be reasonably expected that national conditions favored Gore and that some significant portion of the public's positive views about the state of the nation could be converted by the Gore campaign into votes.

While the strong economy and the public's recognition of it established very favorable conditions for the Gore campaign, the Bush campaign benefitted from another condition: internal party unity and enthusiasm. The unity and enthusiasm of a party for its nominee are crucial in the general election campaign. If a candidate has his party behind him at the outset of the general election campaign, he can concentrate on reaching out to independents and opposition's disgruntled partisans. On the other hand, a candidate who enters the campaign worried about energizing his base is in trouble.

The Republican advantage in party unity was certainly not readily apparent from the way in which the two candidates won their parties' nominations. On the Democratic side, if Gore had to have a challenge at all, the challenge from former New Jersey senator Bill Bradley was the kind to have. Both the strength and direction of Bradley's challenge were nearly perfect for Gore. Bradley failed to win a single primary or caucus, but mounted a challenge that was credible enough to maintain national media attention on Gore's primary victories. It never hurts to be seen as a winner, particularly for a vice president seeking to come out from the shadows of a popular and controversial president. By the same token, the contest for the Democratic nomination was not so bitterly fought that fences could not be reasonably mended after the nomination was settled. Moreover, the juxtaposition of Bradley's generally more liberal message within the more liberal party and Gore's more tempered or less ambitious positions made Gore seem more moderately positioned to appeal to the more centrist general electorate.

The road to the Republican nomination for Texas Governor George W. Bush was not so smooth. Although lacking national political experience, Bush tapped into the political network of his father, former President George Bush, and assembled an unprecedentedly huge campaign war chest and a lengthy list of endorsements from prominent Republicans. After dispensing with an initially crowded field of contenders such

as Elizabeth Dole, Steve Forbes, Dan Quayle, Pat Buchanan, Alan Keyes, and several others, Bush confronted a very serious challenge from Arizona Senator John McCain. McCain's reformist appeal to more moderately conservative Republicans, independents, and "Reagan Democrats" took hold with a significant portion of the party and with the media.

McCain's challenge to Bush was both too strong and from the wrong direction to help Bush's fall candidacy. McCain defeated the much better-financed Bush in seven early primaries. Originally positioned with a more centrist campaign theme of "compassionate conservatism," Bush publicly moved to the right to beat back the McCain challenge and engaged in some campaign activities that might have hampered his fall campaign. Bush's widely covered appearance at the ultra-conservative Bob Jones University, charges of "under-the-radar" mudslinging phone campaigns, and scurrilous "independent expenditure" negative ads against McCain threatened to make the job of internal party fence-mending far more difficult than it might have been. In short, the Republican nomination contest seemed to leave Bush with the more difficult task of reuniting and energizing a more bitterly divided party.⁶

Ironically, though Gore had little difficulty in obtaining his nomination and Bush suffered several setbacks on the way to his, Bush emerged from the nomination process with the more unified party. Based on fourteen Gallup polls conducted in May through July, there was a significantly larger percentage of Republicans who said that they would vote for their party's candidate (91 percent) than Democrats who said that they would vote for their party's standard-bearer (85 percent).⁷ This was the basis for Bush's lead through the summer months and the Republican convention in early August.

The difference in party unity was also evident in the vibrancy of the third-parties. After determining that he could not win the Republican Party's nomination, conservative commentator Pat Buchanan bolted the party to seek the Reform Party's nomination. After much wrangling within that party, Buchanan received the nomination. There was also significant third-party activity on the liberal side of the spectrum in the form of the Green Party. Their candidate was long-time consumer advocate Ralph Nader. It was generally believed that Buchanan's can-

didacy would take more votes away from Bush than from Gore and that Nader's candidacy would have the opposite effect. While neither candidacy exhibited great vote drawing power, certainly nothing on the order of Perot's 1992 and 1996 showings, the Nader candidacy regularly drew several times the support of the Buchanan candidacy.⁸ As the campaign began and as it would prove throughout the following months, Nader's candidacy was a bigger problem for Gore than Buchanan's was for Bush.

Why did Bush have the more united party entering the fall campaign, despite having the rougher nomination contest? The reason would seem to be that Republicans were more determined than Democrats to win this election. After being out of the White House for eight years and having lost the previous two elections partly because of division within their own ranks, Republicans were eager to set aside differences among themselves and unite behind a Republican candidate who could defeat the Democrats in November. The commitment to a Republican general election victory was a key reason why so many Republicans contributed so much so early to the Bush campaign and why the oftentimes conflicting wings of the party kept any differences they might harbor to themselves.

It is often said that "nothing succeeds like success" and though the success embodied in incumbency is normally an asset in seeking the presidency, a party's lengthy tenure office can also be a liability from the standpoint of preserving party unity and enthusiasm. When it comes to holding a party together for the general election campaign, it may be the case that nothing succeeds like failure and nothing fails like success. Having lost the two previous presidential elections Republicans were tired of beating each other up and then suffering through another four years of a Democrat in the White House. For their part, many Democrats became used to a Democratic president and were disillusioned that they were not seeing more liberal policies coming out of the administration and the Gore campaign. Lacking the perspective that comes from the opposition having recently held the office, some Democrats convinced themselves that there was no appreciable difference between Gore and Bush. Unlike Bush, Gore had to work at igniting some enthusiasm in his base. This affected his campaign's message and ultimately made his job of reaching out to centrist voters more difficult.

THE COURSE OF THE CAMPAIGN

The Conventions

Although the Democratic and Republican standard-bearers were known for several months before their August conventions, in many respects the national conventions marked the kick-off of the fall campaigns. As nominations have become settled matters well before conventions in most years, the purpose of conventions have become less one of ending the nomination campaign and more one of helping the party's candidate set forth the campaign's message for why voters should vote for him (or her) in the general election. Despite receiving less attention from the media and the public, both parties took advantage of the conventions as campaign rallies for their candidates and this was reflected in the polls.

Like most candidates in previous elections, both George Bush and Al Gore received convention bumps in their poll standings after their conventions. Table 5.6 presents the division of the Gallup preference polls before and after the Democratic and Republican national conventions. As is custom, the out party, the Republicans in 2000, held their convention first. They met in Philadelphia during the first week of August to nominate George W. Bush and his vice presidential choice, former Secretary of Defense Dick Cheney of Wyoming. The Democrats nominated Al Gore and his vice presidential pick Senator Joe Lieberman of Connecticut, the first Jewish candidate on a national ticket, when they met two weeks later in Los Angeles. Both vice presidential candidates were well regarded political veterans.

Conventions are often disparaged for no longer being deliberative nor surprising. However, this misses a larger point. Conventions as the beginning of the fall campaign often reveal important information about the nature of the campaigns to come over the following months. Are the candidates emphasizing their record and encouraging voters to make retrospective judgments or are they emphasizing promises for future policies and encouraging voters to make prospective judgments? Are they emphasizing broad, consensus appeals or more narrowly targeted partisan appeals? Both Bush and Gore quite clearly set forth in their acceptance speeches their basic campaign appeals of why voters should vote for them. Both candidates emphasized the future

Table 5.6 The Convention Bumps

<i>Time in Campaign</i>	<i>Poll Standing</i> <i>(Percentage of Two-Party Support)</i>	
	<i>Bush</i> <i>(Frontrunner)</i>	<i>Gore</i> <i>(Trailing Candidate)</i>
Before the Convention	56.2	41.5
After the Convention	59.3	50.5
Change: Convention Bump	+3.2	+9.1
Averages from 1964 to 2000 for:		
All Conventions		+6.7
Conventions of Frontrunners		+4.7
Conventions of Trailing Candidates		+8.0

Note: The above figures and computations are based on Gallup polls. The frontrunner or trailing candidate designations are based on the candidates' poll standings prior to their parties' national conventions.

(prospective judgments) rather than the past, but Bush's message reached out from his base while Gore's was directed more clearly at his party's base of support.

Bush's acceptance speech provided voters with both reasons to vote for him and reasons not to vote for Gore. Citing one issue after another, from education to defense to strengthening social security, Bush ended his critique of the Clinton-Gore administration with the refrain: "They have had their chance. They have not led. We will." In essence, if problems remain, why reelect the crowd that has had eight years to solve them and have not delivered. Near the close of his address he summed up the positive case for his election: "Big government is not the answer, but the alternative to bureaucracy is not indifference. It is to put conservative values and conservative ideas into the thick of the fight for justice and opportunity. This is what I mean by compassionate conservatism." Taking a page from Clinton's cooptation of Republican programs, rather than simply ignoring Democratic proposals on issues from education to prescription drug benefits, Bush offered conservative alternatives, increasing his appeal to centrist voters.

In the days before the convention, the Gallup poll indicated that about 56 percent of those indicating a preference for either Gore or Bush favored Bush. After a carefully orchestrated convention to send-off the Bush campaign, support rose slightly to about 59 percent. Given

that Republicans were generally "on board" for the Bush campaign prior to the convention and that Bush was the frontrunner, this small convention bump was about what might be expected.

While seemingly as placid as the earlier Republican convention, the Democratic convention marked a crucial turning point in the campaign of 2000. In his speech accepting the party's nomination, Al Gore made the basis of his fall campaign for the presidency clear. Rather than making the foundation of his message continuing the peace and prosperity of the outgoing Clinton-Gore administration, Gore offered up a populist appeal to working families. The message was a decidedly prospective, change-oriented, class politics appeal to his party's base. Gore told the delegates in the convention hall the message he was to repeat throughout the campaign:

This election is not an award for past performance. I'm not asking you to vote for me on the basis of the economy we have. Tonight I ask for your support on the basis of the better, fairer, more prosperous America we can build together. Together, let's make sure that our prosperity enriches not just the few, but all working families. Let's invest in health care, education, a secure retirement, and middle-class tax cuts. . . . To all the families who have to struggle to afford the right education and the skyrocketing costs of prescription drugs, I want you to know this: I've taken on the powerful forces, and as president, I'll stand up to them and I'll stand up for you.

One would hardly recognize this address and the subsequent campaign following the same theme as coming from a candidate who had served two terms as the vice president to an administration with high approval ratings in a country in which two-thirds rated the economy as excellent or good. Candidates usually are quick to claim credit for good news on their watch, and while a vice president might not be given full credit, he certainly would be accorded a good measure. Yet, Gore was not claiming credit, or certainly not making much of a claim. To establish his candidacy in his own right, to energize his base and, perhaps above all, to avoid the negatives of the Clinton scandals that would inevitably accompany a focus on the accomplishments of the past administration, the Gore campaign had made the strategically controversial decision to downplay the record and instead to run a prospective campaign. Supporters would long question the wisdom of this decision.

Although this decision may have cost Gore a significant number of votes in the end, the immediate effect was positive. It rallied Democrats to the Gore campaign. Before the Democratic convention, Gore lagged in the polls, the preferred candidate of only 40 percent of respondents (to 56 for Bush). Post-convention polls indicated that Gore had gained nine points and closed the gap with Bush. As table 5.6 indicates, this bigger convention bump was to be expected for Gore as the candidate trailing in the polls. Trailing candidates are often running behind their opponent because of problems of solidifying support from their party base. Because conventions help to reunite a party, they are a bigger benefit to the trailing candidate who needs this help and, in this respect, Gore made good use of his convention.

In the next several weeks, the second phase of the campaign, Gore would take a modest lead over Bush. The average poll in September and early October had Gore leading Bush by 52 to 48 among likely voters for the major party candidates. Much of this change seemed due to Gore's message and its energizing impact on Democrats, but glitches in the Bush campaign also reinforced the effect. At one rally in the midwest, an open microphone caught Bush making a derogatory remark to Cheney about a *New York Times* reporter who he had spotted in the crowd. Other Bush gaffes, such as repeatedly mispronouncing "subliminal," when his campaign was charged with airing ads that associated the Gore campaign with the word "rats" (a graphic that focused on the end of the word "bureaucrats") led critics to question whether Bush was intelligent enough to be president.

The Debates

Each presidential campaign since 1976 has had at least one debate between the presidential candidates. In recent elections, despite haggling over the number and format in each year, the norm has become a series of two or three presidential and one vice presidential debate. In the 2000 election, three presidential and one vice presidential debates were held with varying formats. It was widely believed prior to these debates that they would be to the advantage of Vice President Gore. He had greater experience in national debates (participating in both the 1992 and 1996 vice-presidential debates as well as an informal debate on the Larry King show with Ross Perot over the NAFTA) and had

been judged as doing well in them. However, the history of debates also suggested that they did not change many votes, that the most likely viewers of the debates were citizens who had already made up their minds on how they would vote. To the extent that polls had changed after debates in past elections, these changes were largely temporary and had settled back to their original levels even before the next debate was held (Campbell 2000, 56). This year the debates may have had some lasting impact.

The first debate in 2000 employed a traditional format with each of the candidates appearing behind podiums and addressing questions from the moderator, Jim Lehrer of PBS. The debate was quite heated, but allowed each candidate to make his case: Gore for a moderately liberal agenda with an emphasis on preserving Social Security, enhancing various domestic programs, and paying down the national debt and Bush for his moderately conservative positions of allowing some private investment of Social Security taxes and cutting taxes across the board. When Gallup asked registered voters after the debate which candidate "did the better job in the debate," 48 percent said Gore and 41 percent said Bush (see table 5.7). However this was not the full story on the political implications of the debate. In the preference polls, Bush gained ground on Gore after the debate. While voters do not necessarily move toward the "winner" of the debate, debates can affect their preferences by serving as a reality check for the images of the candidates that have been built up during the campaign. Although Gore's quite audible sighing while Bush was speaking and several apparent exaggerations by Gore received the most attention at the time, perhaps the biggest impact of the debate was to dispel impressions that Bush was not smart enough to be president. When voters were asked whether their opinion of each candidate was more or less favorable after watching the debate, more said that their opinion of Bush had improved.⁹

The second debate, using a more informal format with the candidates seated at the same table, also seemed to favor Bush. When Gallup asked registered voters who performed better in this debate, 49 percent named Bush and only 36 percent named Gore. After the debate, Bush gained a couple of more points on Gore in the preference polls.

The third debate used yet a third format, a town hall meeting format in which voters posed questions to the candidates. With each can-

Table 5.7 Effects of the Presidential Debates

<i>Debate</i>	<i>Likely Voter Evaluation of Debate Performance (Gore% minus Bush%)</i>	<i>Preference Poll Shift from Before to After Debate (two-party division for Gore)</i>
First Debate	+7	-4.8
Second Debate	-13	-2.3
Third Debate	+2	-1.6
Overall Shift		-7.3

Note: The debate performance was based on responses to Gallup's question "Regardless of which candidate you happen to support, who do you think did the better job in the debate?" Plus values indicate that more thought Gore did the better job and minus values indicate that more thought Bush did the better job. The preference poll ("If the election were held today, who would you vote for?") shifts were based on averaging Gallup poll and Zogby poll percentages and taking the differences of the three-day tracking polls conducted before and after each debate. As in debates in past years, there was some drift back to previous support levels by the time of the next debate (1.1 percent back to Gore by the time of the second debate and .3 percent back to Gore by the time of the third debate). These drift backs account for the difference between the sum of apparent individual debate effects and the net overall change from before the first debate until after the third.

didate having his good and bad moments, registered voters judged this debate a draw. In the end, over the course of the three debates (and stellar performances by both Dick Cheney and Joe Lieberman in the vice presidential debate), taking place between October 3 and 17, the race changed from Gore having about a 54 to 46 lead over Bush to Bush having about a 53 to 47 percent lead over Gore.

In keeping with the campaign message outlined in Gore's convention speech, the discussion of issues during the debates was largely prospective: about the differences in the candidates' plans for future tax cuts, social security, education, prescription drugs, increased defense spending, a patient's bill of rights, and other issues. Vice President Gore did not mention President Clinton even once in any of the three debates.¹⁰

The Closing Weeks of the Campaign

In the last weeks of the campaign Gore closed the slight lead that Bush had developed from the debates. It remains unclear what the impact on voters was, if any, of the revelation on the Thursday before the election that Bush had been arrested in Maine for drunken driving twenty-four years earlier. He had admitted early in the nomination campaign in very

general terms to past indiscretions, but the arrest was not good news for the Bush camp in the final hours of the race.

In the last few days before the election some polls had Bush still with a slight lead (Gallup and the *Washington Post*) and others had Gore with a similarly slim lead (Zogby and CBS News). Even without the drunk driving revelation, this competitive effect of the campaign was to be expected (Campbell and Wink 1990, Bartels 1992). Late deciding voters as a group usually divide in favor of their party (and more Democrats than Republicans appeared to be in the undecided category of most polls) and more evenly (Campbell 2000, 154–60 and 2001).

Table 5.8 presents a late October *Newsweek* poll demonstrating just how evenly divided voters were about the candidates and the basis for those views. Voters saw both Gore and Bush as having different strengths and weaknesses both as candidates and on the issues. Voters tended to see Gore as more competent and caring, but Bush as more honest and believable. Both were seen as equally likeable and when it came to the issues, voters were just as likely to say that Bush represented their views well as to say that Gore reflected their positions. Gore was seen as better at handling some issues (prescription drugs for seniors, protecting social security, and extending access to health care to more citizens), Bush was seen as better at handling others (national defense and upholding moral values), and they were seen as equally capable on others (education and taxes).

AS CLOSE AS IT GETS

How did this election end up so close? Two aspects of the context for this campaign, the lack of an incumbent in the race and the balance of partisanship, were forces for a close election. However, there were other factors, most notably the economy and the public's overall positive assessment of the Clinton administration (approval ratings of nearly 60 percent), that strongly favored the election of Al Gore. In fact, based on these indications, all of the major models for forecasting presidential elections indicated between July and Labor Day that Gore would win the election. Most of these forecasts predicted that Gore would win with between 53 and 55 percent of the two-party vote.¹¹

The election was much closer than expected because of the cam-

Table 5.8 Voter Reactions to the Candidates

<i>Phrase</i>	<i>Percent agreeing that phrase describes the candidate</i>	
	<i>Gore</i>	<i>Bush</i>
Gore's Strengths		
"Is intelligent and well informed"	82	69
"Cares about people like you"	60	53
Bush's Strengths		
"Is honest and ethical"	52	63
"Says what he believes, not just what people want to hear"	49	58
Equal Strengths		
"Is personally likeable"	67	71
"Has strong leadership qualities"	65	65
"Shares your views on most political issues"	50	50

Source: Newsweek poll conducted by Princeton Survey Research Associates between October 18 and 20.

paigns that the candidates ran, particularly the Gore campaign. With the public recognizing that the economy was strong and with high approval ratings for Clinton, one would have expected Al Gore to run a retrospective, consensus-oriented, stay-the-course campaign. From a strategic standpoint, the expected principal message of the Gore campaign should have emphasized the economic progress that was made under the Clinton-Gore administration. In essence: "if it's not broke, don't fix it." Instead, Gore's message was prospective and confrontational (e.g., charges against Bush's "risky tax scheme for the wealthiest one percent").

This mistake was three-fold. First, and most obviously, Gore all but discarded the political benefits he might have derived from the healthy economy. He may have received some residual benefits from some voters linking him to the good economy on their own, but he failed to help other voters focus on this connection. Second, to the extent that he steered clear of emphasizing the economy to avoid association with President Clinton and his scandals, this was a mistake. While many voters clearly disapproved of Clinton personally, the President's high approval numbers suggested that the package of Clinton and his administration's performance was judged positively by more than a majority

of voters. Gore had a considerable advantage over Bush if he had made the campaign a referendum on the Clinton administration.

The third way in which the Gore message was in error was that he was at a disadvantage to Bush in making the campaign prospectively oriented. A prospective campaign is by its nature a campaign about problems that have not yet been solved. As a member of the administration that had been in office for eight years, voters might well ask why Gore and the Democrats have not solved these problems already and since they have not solved them, maybe the other side should be given a chance to do so. Bush's campaign also deserves credit here. While some commentators dismissed "compassionate conservatism" as an empty slogan, Bush's conservative spin in many policy areas (from Social Security to education) defused the traditional advantage that Democrats had held on these issues. Finally, Bush held an edge over Gore because ideological orientations become more pertinent in prospective campaigns and self-described conservatives more supportive of Bush continue to outnumber self-described liberals who were more supportive of Gore.

Recalling the card game analogy, a major reason that we reached essentially a tie game was because one player (Gore) was dealt a better hand but played it poorly, and the other (Bush) was dealt a weaker hand but did a better job playing it. Two weeks after the cards have been played (as this is being written), it is still unknown whether the game was ultimately decided fairly or whether one of the players had a few cards (or Florida ballots) hidden up his sleeve.

NOTES

1. Arguably, the 1824 election of John Quincy Adams versus Andrew Jackson, Henry Clay, and William Crawford was closer in that no candidate received an electoral vote majority, though the practice of popular voting for presidential electors was still taking hold in that election. In 1828 the total number of citizens voting increased by more than five and one half times the 1824 vote count.

2. Although poll leaders sometimes change in the early stages of the campaign year, one candidate typically holds the poll lead from Labor Day to election day. Since 1952, the poll leader after Labor Day has changed only during

four election years: 1960, 1976, 1980, and 2000. Except for the 1980 election, in which Carter briefly took a lead over Reagan after their late September debate, each of these elections was extremely close.

3. The estimates of campaign effects are based on the difference between the preference polls and the vote. Pre-convention preferences are calculated as the average of the Gallup and Zogby polls (the division of two-party preferences) conducted in July prior to the first national convention. The average of these nine polls indicated that Gore was behind with 46.4 percent of the two-party division, 3.9 points less than the eventual vote. This is a slightly smaller than normal change over this stretch of a campaign. In elections from 1948 to 1996, the average change over this period of a campaign was more than five percentage points. The average of the eleven Gallup and Zogby post-convention polls (from August 20 to September 8) had Gore ahead with 51.2 percent of the two-party division, .9 points more than his eventual vote. From 1948 to 1996, the average change over this period has been about four percentage points (Campbell 2000, 76).

4. Studies finding a strong positive association between presidential approval and the vote include Sigelman (1979), Lewis-Beck and Rice (1982 and 1984), and Brody and Sigelman (1983). Presidential approval ratings are an element of a number of presidential forecasting models (see, the Abramowitz, Holbrook, Lewis-Beck and Tien, and Wlezien and Erikson models in Campbell and Garand 2000).

5. A bivariate regression using July presidential approval ratings to explain the in-party vote finds a much stronger fit (adjusted $R^2 = .72$ compared to .64) when only races with incumbents are examined. A model with an approval and an interaction of approval and whether an incumbent was running indicated that the interaction was statistically significant ($p < .05$) and that the effect of approval on the vote increased by about a third when an incumbent was personally running.

6. Because of the nomination campaign and the more conservative appeal to the Christian Right in order to defeat McCain in southern states (most notably, South Carolina), Bush did not appear especially well positioned to reach out to moderates in the fall campaign. However, the front-end loading of the nomination process may have again been fortuitous for Bush. Because of the length of time between securing the nomination and the conventions, he was able to shift back to his mainstream "compassionate conservatism" message well before the conventions.

7. The median party loyalty of Republicans in these polls was 90.5 percent while the median party loyalty of Democrats was 84.5 percent. Although Republicans have traditionally exhibited greater loyalty than Democrats in

their presidential voting, this has not been the case in the last few elections. In 1992 and 1996, depending on how third-party votes are treated, the loyalty of Democratic partisans equalled or exceeded that of Republicans (Campbell 2000, 34).

8. In fifteen Gallup and Zogby preference polls conducted in June, July, and August, the average support for Ralph Nader was 4.6 percent of the vote and the average support for Pat Buchanan was 2.0 percent of the vote.

9. Most registered voters said that their opinion of each candidate had "not changed much" as a result of the debate: 55 percent said they did not change their opinion of Gore and 52 percent said they remained unchanged about Bush. However, 34 percent said that they had become more positive about Bush and 27 percent said that they had become more positive toward Gore. The remainder said that they had become less favorable about the candidate: 18 percent said this of Gore and 14 percent said this of Bush.

10. Gore put a huge distance between himself and the president he had loyally served with for eight years. The absence of Clinton from the campaign and the absence of even references to Clinton in the Gore campaign was extreme. As evidence of this, the day before the election the *New York Times* ran a frontpage story whose third headline read: "Vice President Invokes Clinton Name During 19-Hour Swing" (Seelye 2000).

11. Seven of these forecasts were presented at the 2000 meeting of the American Political Science Association. The forecasting models by Abramowitz, Campbell, Holbrook, Lewis-Beck and Tien, Lockerbie, Norpoth, and Wlezian and Erikson are presented in Campbell and Garand (2000). The Norpoth model used in 2000 is a variation of the one he presented in the Campbell and Garand book.

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