

THE BATTLE FOR THE WHITE HOUSE

As Indo-US engagement deepens, New Delhi is also increasingly sensitive to the political developments within the United States. Understanding the internal dynamics in the US from an Indian perspective has become an urgent necessity for the Indian policy and business communities. The United States Studies Programme of the Observer Research Foundation hopes to meet this requirement. We welcome comments and suggestions on the Monitor.



Vol. I, Issue 22
November 1, 2004

In this issue

- **Presidential Elections And Voting Choice**
- **Bush, Kerry and the “God Gap”**
- **Can the candidates afford to ignore Arab Americans?**
- **Poll Analysis**

Presidential Elections And Voting Choice

By R. Sridhar

As the final countdown goes on for the US Presidential Elections, 2004, it is increasingly clear that this is one of the most closely fought elections in US electoral history. Just a day before the Elections it is still a statistical tie and the results are anybody's guess. That is why both the candidates are trying until the very last minute to woo the undecided, as well as motivate the loyalists to turnout and vote. This election is likely to be decided more by electoral calculations and miscalculations than by any neat political wave favouring either candidate. Under the American system the Presidency is won by electoral votes and not popular votes as was made amply clear by the results of the 2000 Elections. Both the candidates know that one or two swing states can ultimately decide the outcome of the Elections and that's why no state is unimportant or can be written off until the end.

What decides the American voter's choice in a Presidential Election? Why does an individual voter choose one candidate over another? In spite of the enormous amount of research that has gone into this question, there is still no clear answer to it. Broadly speaking there are 'long-term' as well as 'short-term' factors that influence the voting behaviour of the voter. Long-term factors are persistent over a series of elections, and often, through one's lifetime. Such long-term factors are 'socio-economic' that are permanent or remain static over very long periods of time. In the American context 'Party identification' is considered to be the crucial long-term factor as voters identify largely with one party or the other based on their socio-economic background. Short-term factors are 'politico-psychological' and they fluctuate from elections to elections. It is these short-term forces that explain swings in elections. The three crucial short-term factors in US Presidential elections are candidate

attributes (psychological), policy positions (political) and campaign effects (again psychological).

More than one half of the voters know all along whom they are going to vote for even before the campaign begins. These are the avowed party loyalists and their party identification will not be swayed easily by short-term factors. A candidate need not waste his time trying to convert the loyalists of the other party. Instead the time can be put to better use in trying to win over the undecided, and in motivating one's own loyalists to go and vote on Election Day.

It is an ironical fact that there are more Democratic loyalists than Republican loyalists in the USA at least since the end of the Second World War, and yet more Republicans have become Presidents since 1952. The reason lies in the fact that more Republican loyalists turn out to vote than the Democrats, and also because a larger percentage of Democrats are likely to defect from their Party. The undecided voters are the least likely to vote in an election and normally when they vote they tend to be evenly split between the candidates. The challenge, therefore, is more for Kerry, the Democratic candidate, to ensure that his party loyalists do not defect and also to ensure that they turn out in large numbers to vote.

Candidates' attributes are important for voters who do not have much knowledge about policy issues. The sociological attributes of the candidate such as religion, race and gender are very important influencing factors and so are 'personality traits'. Among the personality traits, 'trustworthiness' is always ranked above other traits such as 'competence', 'knowledge' and 'experience'. This is the main reason why despite the fact that he won the three Debates handsomely by virtue of his knowledge and command over facts, Kerry has not succeeded in getting a decisive swing in his favour. Bush might be seen as "incompetent" by many but the USP he has succeeded in marketing is "trustworthiness."

According to our understanding of a mature democracy, voters should choose on the basis of policies and programmes (rational voting behaviour) and not on superficial personality traits of candidates (non-rational voting behaviour). But, unfortunately for democratic theory, this does not happen in reality. Most studies on US Presidential Elections have shown that party identification and the candidate's image are more critical for voters than policy issues. Of course, this is not to imply that policy issues are not important in voting choice. In the present election, in particular, the critical issues of US security, terrorism and Iraq are certainly going to be major factors determining voters' choice. However what matters more than the issues themselves or the candidates' policy orientation is the capacity of the candidate to "educate" the electorate on the position he has taken and how to make the electorate "interpret" his stand. In the process of "educating" the electorate, the simpler the message, the better. The crucial challenge for Bush in this campaign has been to convince the electorate that he stands for American security more than his opponent. The challenge for Kerry is to convince the electorate that Bush has made the country more insecure by miscalculating about Iraq. The problem for the electorate this time is that both the messages are simple and convincing enough. That's why the electorate is neatly divided on issues this time and neither candidate has got the upper hand based on issues.

The other short-term factor is the electoral campaign, and in a tightly contested race like the present one, campaigning can have a decisive effect. It is difficult to bring about a direct link between any particular campaign event and the election result. Campaigning remains very unpredictable, complex, and unscientific. All that can be

said is that the campaigns are effective when one side has weapons that the other side lacks.

In a major study of all Presidential Elections since 1860 called "Thirteen Keys to American Presidency," Allan Lichtman and Ken DeCell contend that the voters' choice depends on the performance of the previous administration and on certain political conditions that are established well in advance of the election campaign. They identify thirteen keys that are critical to the outcome of a Presidential Election. If five or fewer keys were false, the incumbent party won the election. If six or more were false, the incumbent party lost. A last minute tally of the thirteen keys may be attempted to predict the outcome of the present election.

KEY 1: Party mandate: That the mid-term elections the incumbent party holds more seats in the House of Representatives than it did after the previous elections. TRUE

KEY 2: Contest: There is no serious contest for the incumbent-party nomination. TRUE

KEY 3: Incumbency: The incumbent-party candidate is the sitting president. TRUE

KEY 4: Third Party: There is no significant third party campaign. FALSE ?? (The campaign by Ralph Nader may actually benefit Bush as he is likely to wean away more votes from Kerry's vote bank. The "False" may actually be counted as favourable to the incumbent in the present circumstances)

KEY 5: Short-term economy: The economy is not in recession during the campaign. TRUE?? (The real focus this time will be more on the loss of jobs than on overall economic growth. This will benefit Kerry)

KEY 6: Long-term economy: Per-capita economic growth equals or exceeds the mean growth during the previous two terms. TRUE

KEY 7: Policy change: The incumbent has effected major changes in national policy. TRUE? (But the policy changes in the external front have deeply divided the Nation. Is it an advantage for Bush then?)

KEY 8: Social Unrest: There was no sustained unrest during the term. TRUE

KEY 9: Scandal: The incumbent is not tainted by any major scandal. TRUE (No Monica Lewinsky to rock the boat this time!)

KEY 10: Foreign/military failure: The incumbent has not suffered any major failure in foreign or military affairs. TRUE? FALSE? (A crucial question that cannot be answered easily. Is Iraq seen as a failure by the American people?)

KEY 11: Foreign/military success: The incumbent has scored a major success in foreign or military affairs. TRUE? FALSE? (Again, is the war against Al Qaeda seen as successful? Is the overthrowing of the Saddam Regime seen as a success?)

KEY 12: Incumbent Charisma: The incumbent is seen as charismatic or as a national hero. TRUE?? (Is Bush that charismatic?)

KEY 13: Challenger Charisma: The challenger is seen as charismatic or as a national hero. TRUE?? (Is Kerry seen as a Vietnam Hero?)

Obviously the tally is not clear this time and the critical ambiguity that surrounds certain Keys makes it very difficult to predict the outcome of the race with certainty. As with the rest of the world, the readers of the Monitor are better advised to wait till the final results are announced. One can only hope that there, at the least, will be no uncertainty about who the next US President will be even by the evening of Nov 3.

[R.Sridhar is Asst. Professor, Department of Political Science, Madras Christian College, Tambaram, Chennai and Honorary Research Fellow, ORF Chennai Chapter]

Bush, Kerry and the “God Gap”

By C. Raja Mohan

In the final days of a tightly fought race to the White House, Senator John Kerry has made a significant effort to close what is now being called the “God Gap” with President George Bush.

In a series of speeches from Sunday pulpits in churches to communities across the nation, Kerry has tried to fight off the widespread impression he is a “faithless liberal”. Kerry’s attempts are motivated by prudent political reason.

The simple rule of thumb in American politics is that a large majority of those who go to church regularly vote Republican and those who attend church infrequently tend to vote Democrat.

This truism of course does not apply across the board, say to the African Americans who tend to be intensely religious and exhibit a solid preference for the Democrats. But in general terms, faith matters in American politics and Kerry has had his work cut out.

Secular voters, who gravitate to the Democratic Party, are mortified at Bush's ubiquitous references to god and divine guidance. But most voters like hearing him describe his strong religious faith. A Pew opinion poll in mid 2003 found that an overwhelming 72 percent of voters want to see a president with strong religious beliefs.

President Bush, during the 2000 campaign, cited Jesus Christ as his favourite political philosopher. He is believed to have become a “born-again” Christian at the age of 40 in 1985, when he gave up drinking.

Kerry, on the other hand, is secular in orientation despite being a Catholic by birth. Unlike Bush who is open about his religiosity, Kerry, like all liberals, has tended to be reticent about his faith.

The debate about Kerry’s faith in god is often compared to the 1960 election, when John F. Kennedy became the only American of Roman Catholic denomination ever to be elected to the White House.

But the issues are fundamentally different. In 1960, when Kennedy narrowly won against the Republican candidate Richard Nixon, the question was about whether Americans were ready to elect some one from a minority denomination.

While Kennedy argued then that his faith should not matter to the voters, Kerry is now trying to convince voters that he indeed is religious and his faith in religion should matter to the voters.

In the 1960s, an overwhelming majority of Catholics voted for Kennedy. But today sections of Catholic Church have declared Kerry should not be offered communion, given his support to the women’s right to abortion.

Ironically, on social and ethical issues, the positions of Bush, who is a Protestant of the United Methodist denomination, are closer to those of the Catholic clergy than those of Kerry. Many rank and file Catholics, of course, have little difficulty with the secular orientation of Kerry.

Many analysts in the U.S. believe the Catholic vote -- making up a quarter of the electorate, concentrated in the battleground states, and deeply divided between the candidates -- could decide the election.

But so could turnout among conservative Protestant evangelicals, who make up another quarter of voters and strongly support Bush.

Seeking to close the “God Gap” in a country that has the maximum regular Church attendance among western nations, Kerry has taken to quoting from scriptures. Kerry has gone so far to prove his religious credentials that he has drawn criticism for using places of worship to promote his political views and overstepping the boundary between religion and politics in America.

Kerry’s problems on the “God question” have been accentuated by the deepening divisions within the United States between liberals and conservatives on such issues as the right to abortion, embryonic stem-cell research and gay marriages.

For many religious conservatives, ethical values in the modern world mean defending the right to life and the institutions of marriage and family that are seen as being under threat today.

While President Bush and Republicans have strongly supported the conservatives on these issues, Kerry has to prove his religiosity without giving up his neutralist positions on abortion and gay marriages.

“I’m a Catholic, raised a Catholic. I was an altar boy,” Kerry said in response to a question about abortion in the second Presidential debate last month. “Religion has been a huge part of my life. It helped lead me through a war, leads me today.”

But, Kerry added, “I can’t take what is an article of faith for me and legislate it for someone who doesn’t share that article of faith, whether they be agnostic, atheist, Jew, Protestant, whatever. I can’t do that.”

In other words, Kerry argues that faith should be personal and should not be imposed on others who should have the right to choose abortion or same sex unions.

Religion has been a staple of American politics since the founding of the nation and has had an impact on all social movements like the abolition of slavery, women’s suffrage, civil rights, and anti-war agitations in the past and now on abortion, gay marriages and limits on biological research.

The insistence that ethics and morality should have a role in public life is an enduring feature of American political life. The struggle between those who believe in traditional social values and those who elevate individual preferences to highest level has reached a new intensity in modern America. Some have described this as a fundamental religious war for the soul of America.

Over the decades, social issues have tended to cut across the traditional economic divide that often separated the Republicans and Democrats. Many working class voters who have historically tended to vote Democratic, have in recent decades migrated to the Republicans on issues relating to social ethics and morality.

Protestant African Americans and non-orthodox Jews have generally formed the base for Democrats. But amidst intensified culture wars in America, there could be interesting shift of loyalties this time around.

While the Christian Right is mobilising for Bush, many liberal Christian activists too have warned against the “danger of the church being co-opted by a theology and militarism and nationalism”.

Can the United States Afford to Ignore Arab Americans?

By Harinder Sekhon

The US Department of State released a Fact Sheet to combat anti-Semitism on October 15, 2004. The Fact Sheet states, "The Department of State is committed to combating anti-Semitism throughout the world and is proud of its many accomplishments.... We have undertaken a number of specific and important actions to fight this scourge." The Department of State's instructions to US embassies for the 2004 Country Human Rights Report explicitly requires "them to describe acts of violence against Jewish people and Jewish community institutions." This is a commendable step and reaffirms the commitment of the United States to strive to protect the basic rights of all people. It would however stand the US in good stead if it could take a similar measure to protect the rights of the Palestinian people as well. That would help convince them in particular, and the entire Muslim world in general, of US neutrality and sincerity in resolving the Middle-East problem.

Not since the Vietnam War has foreign policy dominated a US Presidential election campaign so completely as in the present one. Besides the unilateral action in Iraq, for which US credibility has paid a high price, public opinion within the USA is becoming increasingly focused on the stalemate in the Middle East peace process launched with much fanfare by the US Government in December 2002. The failed diplomacy in Iraq coupled with the deadlocked Israeli-Palestinian peace plan, where the US is perceived as being unwavering in its support to Israeli aggressiveness, has had its reverberations among the Arab-American community within the United States. Although numerically they do not represent a large voting bloc in the country, constituting merely about 1.2 million Americans, or 0.4% of the total US population, according to the US 2000 census, this is a voice that cannot be ignored. This segment has emerged as an active force in the US political arena in the aftermath of the September 11 attacks and the key domestic issues of concern to it are racial profiling, discrimination and intimidation, while in the realm of foreign policy, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and Iraq dominate.

President Bush and John Kerry both profess that bringing security and stability to the Middle East is vital to American security, as also to the security of Israel and other countries in the Middle East. But the general impression is that there has been a complete "abdication of leadership" by both to resolve the Middle East conflict with "neither offering any serious proposals to break the deadlock". The Arab-American community, especially in the key state of Florida – that has been assiduously courted by the Democrats since 2000 – is disenchanted with the post-September 11 policies of the Bush administration that many believe "unfairly target Muslims and Arab Americans in the government's quest to root out terrorists." A recent Pew Research Centre opinion poll showed that even in countries like Egypt, Jordan, Lebanon and Morocco, that have pro-American governments, almost the entire population holds an unfavourable opinion of the US. This is a reflection of the failure on the part of the US to engage more positively and respectfully with Islam and its religious leaders. The US would need to be more objective in its actions in the Middle East and usher in lasting peace in the region that has seen some fierce fighting since September 2004 over the removal of Israeli settlements and soldiers from the Gaza Strip. According to the UN's Under-Secretary General for Political Affairs, Sir Keiran Prendergast, violence rather than communication seems to be the preferred mode of communication in the Middle East with "neither side fulfilling its obligations under the Roadmap." In September alone 206 Palestinians and 13 Israelis have been killed in the renewed violence and the UN officials have asked the Government of Israel to

“respect legal obligations when it comes to ensuring the safety of Palestinian civilians and to refrain from the disproportionate use of force.” Similarly, Palestinians need to ensure that they will keep their word.

Last week, amidst massive opposition and tension, and with thousands of Israeli settlers demonstrating outside Parliament, the Israeli Knesset, by a very narrow margin, approved Ariel Sharon’s plan to remove all Israeli settlements from Gaza. Sharon’s own Likud Party is opposed to such a move and would try to block any permanent Israeli withdrawal from Gaza. Most, however, only view this as a ploy by Sharon to further strengthen Israeli hold over the West Bank and also to deflect attention from the main issue of the creation of a Palestinian state. Further complicating matters in the region, is the incapacitation of the ailing Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat, who has been flown to Paris for treatment. The nature of his illness appears to be critical and his departure from the scene could lead to further turmoil in the Middle East.

These developments have not gone unnoticed by the Arab Americans. They are a frustrated lot and while they are furious over the partisan approach of the Bush administration after September 11, the record of the Democrats has not enthused them either. Democratic politics has also been characterized by staunch support for Israel and extremely close ties with the American Jewish community. Kerry has however been astute in realizing that if he can successfully swing the Arab American vote in his favour, without upsetting the Jewish lobby, especially in Florida, it could be enormously beneficial. He has consequently worked hard to find common ground between moderate Arabs and moderate Jews on domestic issues like socio-economic reforms and civil liberties. But his past record on developments in the Middle East has not gone down well with the Arabs and this could still upset the apple cart for the Democrats. Irrespective of who wins the elections, US diplomacy would need to tap its potential and rise to the occasion by helping create conditions through a comprehensive multi-lateral effort where both the Palestinians and Israelis can coexist peacefully.

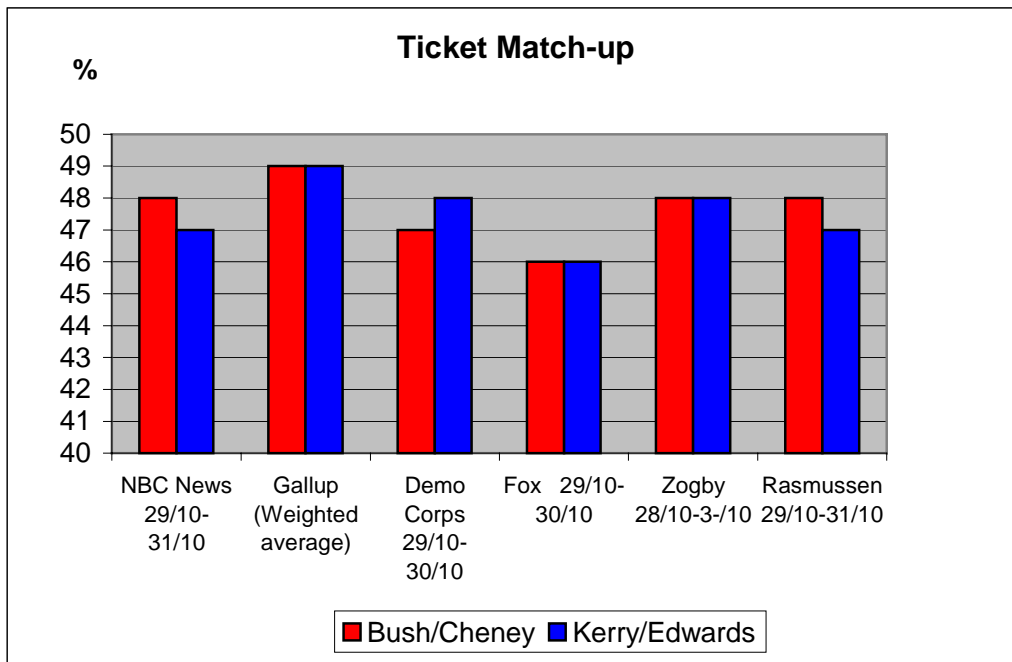
^ ^ ^

Poll Analysis: All over bar the shouting

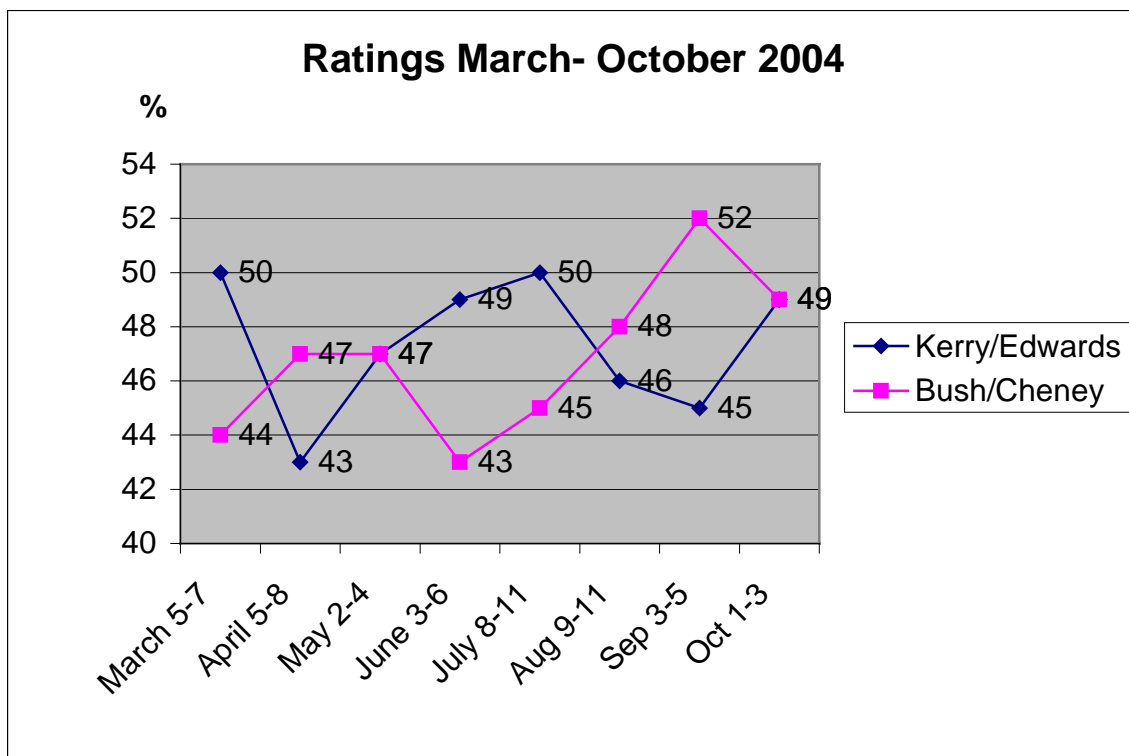
As it comes down to the wire, here’s a look at the final figures in the Presidential race. The Presidential race is pretty much deadlocked. Margin of error calculations make it pretty much impossible to make any sort of prediction despite positions firming up for the two candidates in a number of swing states. According to the *Los Angeles Times Tracking Poll*, while Ohio seems all set to go Kerry’s way, Florida and Pennsylvania look set to be added to the Bush kitty. Ohio has 20 electoral votes, Pennsylvania 21, and Florida 27. Again, of these Bush carried Ohio and Florida last time while Gore had won in Pennsylvania.

The two candidates have spent much of their time and the bulk of their remaining funds in these swing states trying to sway the hearts and minds of the voters with impassioned appeals to vote keeping in mind the fact that the future of the United States rests in their hands.

Since a picture speaks more than a thousand words, the following graphs should present a much better picture of polls, past and present.

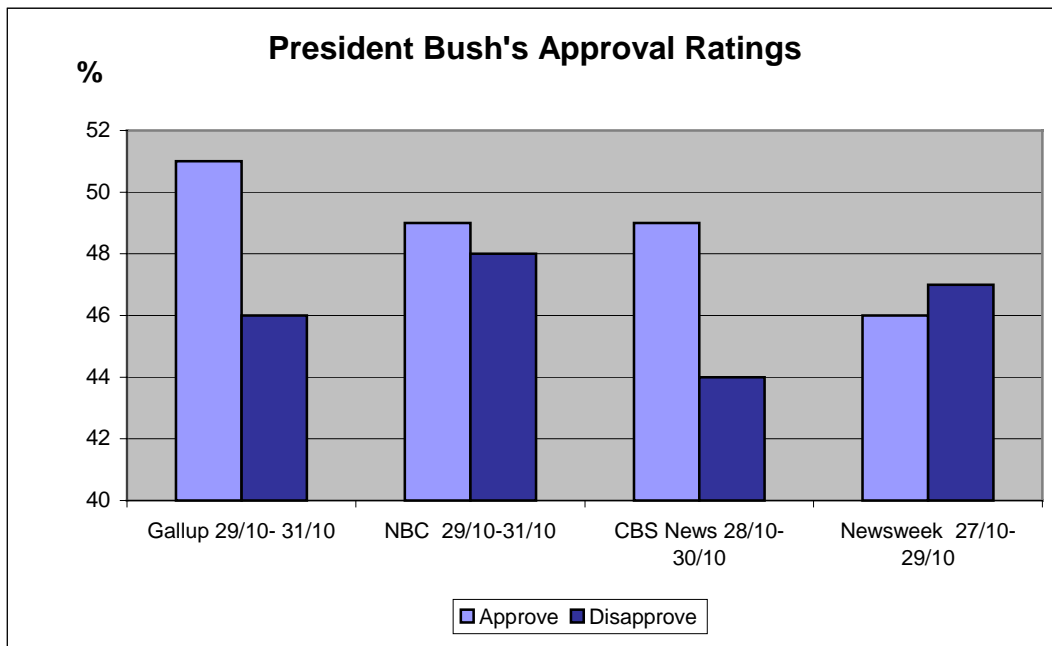


The ratings have fluctuated quite wildly over the past months, though within a narrow range. Though both candidates and their spinmasters tried their hardest to find that elusive issue/ slogan that would get them ahead in the polls, that did not happen.

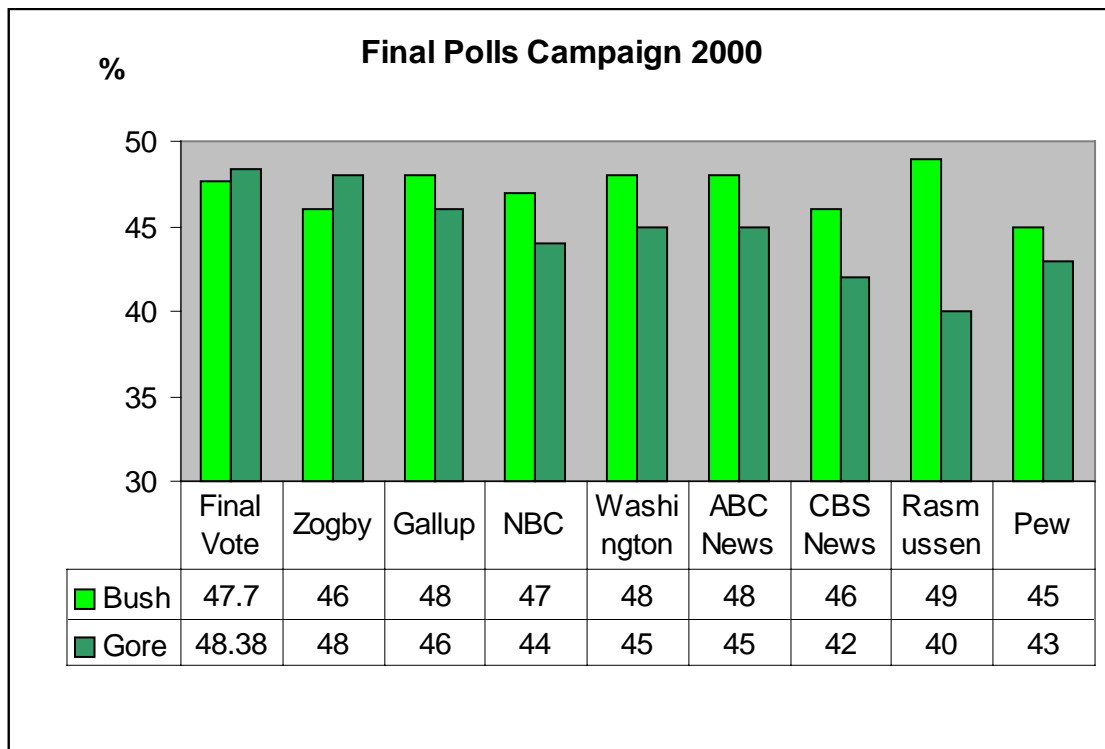


Gallup Poll

Come tomorrow, President Bush might well be out of a job, or all set to rule for the next four years, which, irrespective of who comes to power are certain to be seminal years for both America and the world. The President's job approval ratings are still on the positive side, barring the Newsweek poll which gives him a negative rating.



For the record, here's a look back at the last polls of the 2000 election campaign. Barring Zogby, all the other polls were well off the mark.



 EDITORIAL TEAM: Dr C. Raja Mohan, Cherian Samuel, Ashok Sharma and Avanti Bhati

Readers Comments: ORF would like to thank the recipients of the US Election Monitor for the number of encouraging responses that they have sent to the past

twenty issues. We value our readers and their opinions and we invite them to write in on issues and arguments, carried in the Monitor, or simply send us their comments. *Disclaimer: If you do not wish to receive this newsletter in the future, please do let us know by writing to cherians@orfonline.org.*

We appreciate your support and your patience in our endeavours.