

# Three Mistakes the Democrats Shouldn't Make Again

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Posted: July 7, 2008 08:07 PM

As we finish celebrating the Fourth of July weekend with almost exactly four months until Election Day, Democrats are feeling confident that this will be a good year for their party's presidential candidate. Before Democrats get too excited or overconfident, it should be remembered that the previous sentence could have been just as easily written in 2000 or 2004. Looking back on the last two presidential elections provides an opportunity for supporters of Obama to consider what mistakes the Democrats made in the last two elections and to think about how they can be avoided this time.

First, the Obama campaign should not make the mistake of assuming that most voters know as much about the candidates as the insiders too. In 2000 many Gore supporters were deeply convinced that somebody who they perceived as an intellectual lightweight, party boy with a rich father, famous name and paper thin resume simply could not get elected president. They probably would have been correct in this assessment had most voters viewed George W. Bush this way, but the Democratic campaign overestimated the extent to which ordinary voters were aware of what they perceived as such obvious negatives about candidate Bush.

It was not precisely overconfidence that cost the Democrats that year, but a related concept. Stories of Bush's history of partying, abrasive style and lack of knowledge on a breadth of subjects so permeated liberal and Democratic circles in 1999 and 2000, that people in that world were not aware that this view of George W. Bush was not broadly shared by most of the electorate. Therefore, instead of spending time and money portraying Bush this way in the media, the Democratic Party took this perception as implicit and built from there. This was, of course, a big mistake.

In 2004, this issue was not as pronounced as Bush was an incumbent and better known. Nonetheless, the Democratic campaign only infrequently hit hard on what were the most glaringly obvious of Bush's negatives -- his mishandling of the war in Iraq and the way he brought the country into that war. The lesson for the Democratic campaign in 2008 is not to assume that voters know that McCain is a hard line social conservative or that he has been a supporter of the war in Iraq from the beginning. It is worth spending time and money reminding voters of these seemingly obvious, but nonetheless very important, facts.

Second, although the economy and gas prices are dominating the news and the minds of voters, the Democrats should not make the mistake of focusing exclusively on the economy. It would be a major mistake to assume that the war and Iraq and security issues generally will not be more on voters mind as the election approaches in November. In 2004 John Kerry's focus on the economy, particularly in the last few weeks of the campaign, left an opening for Bush to refocus the election on security issues which were a relative strength for the Republicans.

While it is clearly an advantage for Obama if voters' primary concerns are economic, the Democrats cannot assume this will be the case throughout the election. It is important to recognize that the war in Iraq, terrorism and security remain important issues and, more significantly, are issues where the Republicans believe they have an advantage. McCain and the Republicans will seek to shift the emphasis of the campaign back from domestic to international issues. It is likely that at least some events between now and November will contribute to this change of emphasis.

The Democrats must be prepared for this and be able to speak to voters convincingly about their superiority on foreign policy issues. Obama has helped himself tremendously by not ceding anything to McCain on foreign policy knowledge or expertise. If Obama continues to do this, the Republicans will not be able to use foreign policy to their advantage, but if Obama and the Democrats believe they can win only by talking about domestic politics, as seemed to be the case in 2004, they will pay for that belief in November.

A third mistake the Democrats have made in each of the previous two elections is to underestimate the ability of Republican voters to mobilize their conservative base. In both 2000 and 2004, Democrats were very proud of their efforts to mobilize their party's base but overestimated the impact this would have on the election because they did not seem to consider that the Republican candidate had a base of his own and strategies for getting a big turnout from those voters.

This year, excitement around Obama's candidacy will almost certainly contribute to higher than usual turnout from African American voters, which will help the Democrats. However, over the last decades we have seen that nothing mobilizes white Republican turnout in the south as effectively as a strong African American Democratic candidate. Thus, while a heavy African American vote will help the Democrats, it is likely that a reaction to that vote will help the Republicans and counter at least some of that Democratic advantage. Moreover, the Republican Party has learned how to do its own turnout operations and get their conservative base to the polls; and they will probably be able to do it by November even given the lack of enthusiasm for McCain.

In a highly contested political campaign, four months can seem like a lifetime, or it can seem like just a brief moment. Usually it feels like both. There are a lot of things which could happen over which Obama and the Democrats have little control. McCain could suddenly get back some of his old magic and become a strong candidate again. An event could serve as a rallying point for conservative forces who seem unexcited about this year's campaign. Voters could begin to view the surge and the efforts in Iraq as successful and support McCain's argument that somehow this makes him the candidate best able to finish the job in Iraq. While these are all things that are largely out of the control of Obama's campaign, the campaign can make its work a lot easier by learning from, and not repeating, mistakes from their party's very recent past.