

Why This Election Is So Close

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Even the most cynical reader of polls would have to agree with the basic finding that this race is going to be very close. Assuming that is the case, and there is little reason not to assume that, this will be the third straight election which could be described as very close. This is all but unprecedented in American history. With the possible exception of 1880-1888 where all three elections were close in popular vote, but less so in electoral vote, it is difficult to find even two elections in a row which were as competitive as the last two elections or as competitive as this election is likely to be.

This finding is more than just a quirk of history, but it tells us not only something about where our country is politically, but also about what is going on in this presidential race. Supporters of Obama and the Democrats in general, have long expressed frustration with how close this race is. The mortgage crisis, and now the larger economic crisis, the ill-conceived, to say the least war in Iraq where, the surge notwithstanding, victory still seems a distant and poorly defined target, the broader issues of corruption and incompetence which have characterized the Bush administration all suggest that this should be a relatively easy Democratic year.

The reverse argument could have been made about the 2000 campaign where Al Gore, running as the sitting vice-president, should have won handily given the strong state of the economy and the absence of any divisive foreign policy issue such as an unpopular war. However, as we all know, things didn't quite work out that way. The election came down to a bizarre series of events which eventually were resolved with George Bush winning. It is easy to overlook, amidst the chaos and controversy regarding Florida, that the 2000 election never should have been that close. It is hard to find an election in modern history where the incumbent party did not win decisively in such good times as 2000, just as it is difficult to find an election in recent history where the incumbent party did not lose badly when faced with an economy and foreign policy environment such as the one we now face.

Efforts to explain Gore's defeat and Obama's failure to break this race open, particularly among frustrated progressives -- a group to which I also belong, often focus on short term explanations such as Gore's wooden campaign style and failure to use President Clinton effectively in the last few weeks of that campaign, or the attempts by Republicans to suppress votes and tamper with the outcome in Florida. Today the failure of Obama to open up a bigger lead is often attributed to latent racism, his choice of Biden over Clinton as his running mate or his failure to hit back at John McCain.

While there are certainly elements of truth in all these explanations for both of these elections, they obscure two bigger picture developments that help explain why this election and the last two have been so close. The first is that economic uncertainty, particularly among the middle class has become a constant in American life over the last two or three decades. While economic

times certainly were better during the Clinton years than during the Bush years, many middle class Americans were still worried about their economic futures, paying off debts, lack of good healthcare etc. Similarly, the last Democratic administration before Clinton did not exactly usher in economic good times. Accordingly, many Americans while frustrated and scared about the economy no longer see the economy as something which a president can fix. Therefore it becomes less salient in their vote choice.

Voters are scared about the economic future and when pushed a majority probably recognize that Obama would be a far more qualified and competent president on economic matters than McCain, but this does not mean that voters think Obama can make the economy sound again. The notion that the issues are too big, too global and too complex for any president to resolve is a natural conclusion for many voters; and they are probably right.

The second development is that because we now have ideological parties, and ideological voters in the US, voters rely less upon their evaluation of the performance of the incumbent party and more on voting for the party with whom they share opinions on a range of issues. A half century ago, both parties had strong liberal and conservative wings and often nominated centrist candidates for presidents, thus obscuring ideological differences and making it natural for voters to rely more on a retrospective approach to voting. This is no longer the case.

Not only are today's electorate and parties more divided on ideological lines, but the country is split roughly evenly on these issues with only a small number of people truly in the middle. In this context, as long as each candidate can mobilize their party's base, presidential elections are almost guaranteed to be close. Obama solidified his base early, but even then could not open up a big lead, because voters who were not yet sold on McCain still were not eager to support a liberal Democrat. For these voters, ideology was more important than evaluations of the incumbent administration. In recent weeks, all the noise about Palin notwithstanding, all she has done to help McCain is solidify her party's base thus ensuring another extremely close race.

This ideologically driven and deadlocked electorate means that this election will not just be decided in a handful of swing states, most of which, were also decisive in 2004 and 2000, but that the same types of swing voters in these swing states will determine the next president. While turnout will be important, it will probably be high on both sides due to the closeness of the race and excitement about Obama on the Democratic side and excitement about stopping Obama on the Republican side. This election, which in many respects is like no other in American history, is turning out to look quite a bit like two others, at least in terms of voting patterns and is likely to come down efforts to persuade the same fraction of a fraction of the electorate as in 2000 and 2004.