

Will Obama's Trip Have an Impact?

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The presidential campaign has begun to fall into a recognizable pattern. Every week, Obama seems to begin to appear more presidential and generate good news for his campaign, while McCain seems less able to handle the task of running for president. Each week he seems to make a few more gaffes, get a few more details wrong and generally fail to generate much excitement. Yet, the poll numbers remain stubbornly close. The newest national polls continue to show this race as almost a dead heat while statewide polls show Obama and McCain splitting the likely battleground states. The good news last week for McCain was that he was pulling ahead in Ohio and in a dead heat with Obama in Florida, while Obama had slight leads in key states such as Virginia, New Hampshire and Colorado. Obama is still the favorite but the poll numbers seem to be moving a lot more slowly than the campaign narrative.

This pattern is part of a campaign where increasingly the two candidates, and parties, seem to be talking past each other rather than engaging with each other. The candidates seem to be running parallel rather than competing campaigns that rarely confront each other directly. A major challenge in any campaign is to achieve the right balance between being pro-active, setting the agenda for the campaign, presenting proposals, focusing on strengths etc. and being reactive by responding to attacks from the opponent or addressing topics raised by the opponent or the media. Both candidates have been considerably more proactive than reactive in this campaign. Obama, in particular, has stayed on message and on his plan in the face of attacks from McCain. McCain has generally been a low key and uninspiring candidate, but he has kept to his message of experience and the need to be steadfast in Iraq and in fighting terror. The way the campaign is going, one gets the feeling that on November 5th if Obama wins, McCain will hold a press conference to announce the surge is working, while if McCain wins Obama will be photographed looking presidential giving a speech about change.

This situation is exacerbated by a media context which, while providing voters with more information about, and exposure to, the candidates than in any previous election, also allows voters to view the candidates through their own ideological prism. It seems as if half the country is checking the Huffington Post, TPM and the Daily Kos regularly while watching Keith Olberman and Jon Stewart every evening while the other half is checking the Drudge Report regularly, listening to Rush Limbaugh and watching Fox News. This is obviously something of an exaggeration but in an election where from the beginning there have been very few undecided voters, it is not a dramatic one.

The polls this week will be very important and tell us a bit more about what to expect in the next 100 days until the election. If there was ever a week that was going to help Obama build his lead, last week was it. For Obama it was an extraordinary week. His trip to the Middle East and Europe dominated the news and generated an enormous amount of positive publicity and excitement. The trip further demonstrated Obama's ability and judgment on foreign policy.

McCain, on the other hand, had a dismal week as he was left behind in the US to kvetch about media bias, troll the aisles of a grocery store, and ride around in a golf cart with George H.W. Bush. At least, this is how it looked through my eyes, watching MSNBC, reading the *New York Times* and perusing the Huffington Post and TPM on a regular basis during the last week. Nonetheless, if, based on last week's successes, Obama is able to open up a consistent lead of 8-12 points by the end of the week, we may be moving towards the decisive victory for Obama which has seemed within reach for several months now.

If, however a major foreign trip by Obama which included visits to Afghanistan, Iraq and Israel, a major speech to a huge audience in Berlin and meetings with numerous heads of state, does not help Obama increase his lead, it is not clear what will. If Obama is still up by between 2-6 points in the polls this week, it is likely we will continue to be stuck in a campaign where each side is talking to its own voters through its own media. For example, those voters who tuned in to Fox, Drudge and the *New York Post* during the last week would have seen a very different campaign, one where Obama's popularity among non-Americans was confirmed while McCain campaigned among real Americans and attacked Obama for not supporting US troops.

Obama's current lead of 2-6 points in most polls may be enough for Obama, who has held a lead for most of the last two months and only has 100 days to go before the election, to win. He clearly is the stronger candidate in what looks to be a Democratic year and therefore holds the upper hand in this election. However, an Obama victory of this sort will likely be narrow in which only a small handful of voters actually switch their vote from 2004. This type of victory will not be the paradigm shifting event may Obama supporters would like to see, but will suggest that much of the country, while increasingly frustrated with and angry at the Bush White House remains as polarized as in the last two election cycles and that the campaigns have been more successful at speaking to their supporters rather than to those few undecided voters.