



THE VIEW

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A MID-SUMMER'S CHECK-UP ON THE PRESIDENTIAL RACE

BY

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There is no summer lull in the Presidential campaign. Both candidates are trying to get their licks in before the Beijing Olympics borrows the stage for a couple of weeks.

This past week Barack Obama accepted the challenge thrown at him by Republican presumptive nominee John McCain to get out and see the world and remedy the presumed deficit in international affairs possessed by the Democratic nominee-to-be. Judged by McCain's reaction, he didn't expect such a grand production from Obama. Cameras and the anchors from the major networks followed Obama throughout his journey through Europe and the war-torn Middle East.

The week could have been successful beyond all speculation for Obama, but he left one big door open for John McCain to walk through, and McCain gladly accepted the opportunity. That pertained to the ever present "surge" in Iraq. McCain spent many months virtually alone in his defense of the decision to send nearly 30,000 new troops into Iraq in an attempt to bring the war under control. The surge has apparently worked. Obama, perhaps somewhat shell shocked from being the recipient of the past effective Republican campaign tactic of labeling any change of direction as the actions of a "flip flopper," stood pat on his refusal to credit the surge, or those who advocated it, with any success in controlling the events in Iraq. This will be brought up time and again in the coming days as a litmus test of the Democratic nominee's judgment.



So where are we? Opinion polls seem to cross our television screens almost hourly. There are fairly wide differences of opinion reflected in these polls when specific issues are addressed. Obama can be pleased with the obvious trust the country places in him on issues related to the economy, education and many other areas. McCain's numbers reveal a similar lean in his behalf when international affairs are mentioned. Nevertheless, in the all-important head-to-head matchup poll, the race, for all practical matters, is a tie. The question looms larger every day as to the reasons why this is so, particularly in a year when most indicators say that the Democrats should be having their way with the frustrated voters.

In order to consider this question, perhaps a look at recent history, more specifically the 2000 Presidential election, may be instructive. First, do not forget that the popular vote is only half of the equation. The resulting vote of the Electoral College determines who ultimately will occupy the White House. Recall that the election year 2000 came on the heels of a two-term Democratic Presidency. The Republican candidate George W. Bush was little known except for the Bush family name. Because of this, the word "gravitas" with a question mark became a major campaign issue. Only by adding veteran Republican operative Dick Cheney as his running mate did Bush calm those fears to some extent. As that historic election unfolded, Democratic nominee and sitting Vice-President Al Gore won the popular vote by over half a million votes. However, with 270 electoral votes needed to win, George Bush garnered 271, and became President of the United States.

Early analyses of the 2008 electoral vote have shown Barack Obama's lead to be somewhat more comfortable than is the case with the popular vote, but neither candidate is anywhere near a projected 270 needed to win. The bigger question remains then as to what to make of the virtual tie between McCain and Obama in the popular vote, with the second biggest question waiting in the wings, and that is what implication these numbers have for the all-important electoral vote. Numerous pundits have begun to offer all sorts of reasons as to why Obama is not currently the beneficiary of a wider gap in the polls. Some say the electorate is still not familiar enough with Obama to be comfortable with him. Others point to the reluctance of the Hillary Clinton crowd to follow the directive of their leader into the Obama camp. The more cynical among them opine that Senator Clinton would be best served by a McCain victory and a one term presidency so that she would be in a prime position to run in 2012. While most commentators are doing all that they can to avoid discussing it, the issue of Obama's race cannot be discounted. Polls have shown middle-aged white men and particularly women leaning heavily toward

McCain. In addition, there is also considerable concern that a large number of African-American voters, particularly in the 18 to 30 age bracket, have never registered to vote. Estimates of the number of eligible, but unregistered, black voters across the South and in inner cities are startling if they are accurate.

As we head toward the conventions the choices of the Vice-Presidential candidates of the respective parties loom large. Following the conventions the roll of the debates will be more significant than any since the classic Kennedy-Nixon debates in 1960. We have a number of ways of keeping score. Watch the public opinion polls and find a map of the United States with the electoral votes for each state listed. Then run some copies and keep a blue crayon and a red crayon handy. This is shaping up to be a fun ride.

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