

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. The *ORF Monitor* aims to provide a weekly assessment on the November elections to the White House. We welcome comments and suggestions on the Monitor.



Vol. I, Issue 17
September 28, 2004

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Television or Tunnel Vision? Media and the Elections

By Cherian Samuel

With six in ten Americans citing television as their main source of information about the presidential elections, the media plays a crucial informational and agenda shaping role in the election process. Down the years, audience fragmentation within media and across media has meant that campaign managers have to work that much harder to ensure that their candidates' message reaches a majority of Americans.

Delivery systems for television channels now run the range from cable to satellite with more Americans watching the news delivered through their cable systems than from the earth-bound three big daddys of yesteryear, NBC, ABC, and CBS. Similarly, there has been a shift in viewing preferences with personality based talk-shows such as Jay Leno's *Tonight Show* and Oprah Winfrey's "Oprah" ranking much higher in the popularity ratings than "hard-nosed" news and current affairs programs in the three hours of television watched by the typical American every day. According to a Pew Research Centre survey, the "Oprah" show is watched by 22 million viewers, 80 percent of them women. Another finding was that more than 50% of young voters got their political news and insights from late night comedy programs such as "The Daily Show" hosted by Jon Stewart.

Therefore, for the candidates, a stopover at these shows has now become *de rigueur*; prior to the Democratic Primaries, one or the other of the presidential hopefuls was sure to pop up on one of these shows. Post the primaries, Sen. John Kerry rode into the *Tonight Show* studios on a Harley Davidson motorcycle clad in leather. (And just last week, Kerry was a guest on the Regis show, hosted by Regis

Philbin, former presenter of “Who Wants to Be a Millionaire” where he joked that during the Presidential debates, President Bush wanted to have the debates based on the show’s format, complete with “lifelines”.)



John Kerry riding into the sets of the Tonight Show

As is generally the case, there are two schools of thought weighing in on the issue. While some commentators say that this new trend amounts to trivializing the presidential campaigns, others counter that it, in fact, humanizes it and takes it away from the world of “sound-bite” and “horse-race” journalism with the latter’s emphasis on campaign strategy and opinion polls rather than issues, which is not at all a bad thing. In any case, in recent years, mainstream television news journalism has been losing its sheen, being charged by media watchers with exhibiting political bias in coverage, especially after the advent of Rupert Murdoch-owned Fox News and its blatantly partisan news coverage. The current controversy at CBS News surrounding the case of papers relating to President Bush avoiding the draft that ultimately turned out to be fake is yet another nail in the coffin of the credibility of television news.

Television is also given the dubious credit of reducing the political parties to mere ciphers by focusing primarily on the candidates and turning the elections into personality driven ones. Once set rolling, that particular ball picked up momentum with the advent of political advertising in 1952 in the race between Dwight D. Eisenhower and Adlai Stevenson. Stevenson made it easier for Eisenhower by refusing to put out ads himself. In subsequent campaigns, none of the candidates have made that mistake, spending millions of dollars in the process. Some candidates such as independent candidate Ross Perot in the 1992 campaign ran a purely television advertising dependent campaign, spending over \$ 40 million to buy up half-hour segments of television time to present his candidacy to the voters, as against the 30-second ads put out by the two main candidates. Perot showed the power of television advertising, winning over 19 percent of the popular vote though he couldn’t manage any electoral votes since he didn’t win any state.

According to some estimates, expenditure on political advertising in the current General Elections has increased by 116.4 percent over expenditure in 2000 to touch \$1.87 billion. The two main presidential candidates are estimated to have spent, between them, well over \$200 million so far on just television ads.

With that kind of money going in, political ads have become a major tool of the campaign, with much thought going into their conceptualization, presentation, and optimum timings telecast timings. In the current campaign, for instance, the bulk of

such ads are being played in the so-called battle-ground states, which can go either way.

This strategy is paying off as far as political parties are concerned; respondents to research surveys now routinely give political ads as their main source of information about campaign issues, way above television news.

As the campaign juggernaut rolls on with yet another made-for-TV event, the presidential debates, coming up, in addition to the usual questions about the tail wagging the dog *et al*, the question also arises as to whether the packaged perfection of the television ad has had a hand in making the average American cynical about the election process, and is partly responsible for the low turn out in elections year after year.

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National Security as a Factor in US Elections

By Chintamani Mahapatra

It has aptly been said that politics is always local and economics dominate local politics. By implication, economic factors largely influence the outcome of elections in major democracies around the world.

However, it would be fallacious to ignore the role of other factors, including national security. The current presidential election campaigns in the United States are comparatively more focused on national security issues than elections in recent years, and for good reason.

The current election debate is taking place in the midst of a continuing war against terrorism and US military intervention in Iraq. The war against terrorism began less than a year after the last presidential election in 2000 and is still in progress. The military intervention in Iraq began months before the political process for the 2004 presidential race began and there is no sign yet of US military operations ending in that country either.

Historically, the American people have not been in favour of military adventures abroad. In fact, the United States has been able to enter a major war only after it has been attacked or in the face of a threat perception visible to its citizens. While it was the sinking of the *Lusitania* by a German submarine which precipitated American entry into the First World War, Pearl Harbour saw American entry into the Second World War, and the Gulf of Tonkin incident was used as an excuse for entry into Vietnam.

When a presidential election takes place in the middle of a war, as is the case now, presidential candidates find themselves on the horns of a political dilemma and they have to walk a fine line when it comes to taking a stand on national security issues during their campaigns.

For instance, the 1916 US Presidential elections took place in the midst of World War I. While the Republican Party campaigned for a preparedness programme, the Democratic Party's candidate Woodrow Wilson campaigned on the slogan "He Kept Us Out of War" to appeal to the popular desire for peace. Simultaneously, he also tried to generate public support for expanding the armed forces. Wilson was the victor in that election.

President Franklin D Roosevelt began campaigning for a third term in office in 1940 while World War II was ravaging on. Receiving guidance and support from

Roosevelt, the US Congress voted to expand the army, build new aircraft and naval ships. In September of that year, the US began its first peacetime draft. But at the same time, in response to popular sentiment, Roosevelt made a pledge that no Americans would ever have to fight in a foreign war. (Privately, he said that the war would no longer be “foreign”, if the US was attacked.) Roosevelt got a third term.

The 1964 US presidential election took place at a time when the US was already deeply involved in Vietnam. The Republican candidate was Senator Barry Goldwater who proposed an all-out war against the Communists in Vietnam. Lyndon Johnson, who became President after Kennedy’s assassination, and was the Democratic nominee, pledged “not to send American boys nine or ten thousand miles from home to do what Asian boys ought to be doing for themselves.” Johnson won that election.

The national security concerns in the US are more acute today than anytime in the past and President Bush is aware of the fear and apprehensions of ordinary Americans since the 9/11 incident. He has thus made national security one of the main issues in his election campaigns.

In his radio address to mark the anniversary of the attack on the twin towers, President Bush said that the United States, in pursuing the war against terror, is safer now than it was three years ago, but not yet completely safe. He vowed that the United States would stay on the offensive until terrorists are defeated and said “More than three-quarters of al Qaeda’s key members and associates have been detained or killed. We know that there is still a danger to America. So we will not relent until the terrorists who plot murder against our people are found and dealt with.”

John Kerry, the Democratic candidate, is yet to clearly spell out whether he has an alternative vision on how to prosecute the war on terrorism. His approach has been to criticize the President’s actions and saying, if given a chance, he could do the job better without going into specifics. For instance, in a speech made in February, he said: “Day in and day out, George W. Bush reminds us that he is a war President and that he wants to make national security the central issue of this election. I am ready to have this debate. I welcome it. I am convinced that we can prove to the American people that we know how to make them safer and more secure – with a stronger, more comprehensive, and more effective strategy for winning the War on Terror than the Bush administration has ever envisioned.”

Iraq is a different case, with US troops on the ground, but with no exit route in sight. President Bush has failed to justify the military intervention in Iraq. He achieved the goal of removing Saddam Hussein from power, but the major argument for attacking Iraq was to remove Weapons of Mass Destruction (WMD) which are yet to be found anywhere in that country. The rising death toll of American soldiers and civilians and the lack of an exit strategy made Bush politically vulnerable at home. The Republican Party campaigns have focused more on Saddam’s removal and less on US casualties. There has also been a failed attempt to link terrorist networks with the Saddam regime.

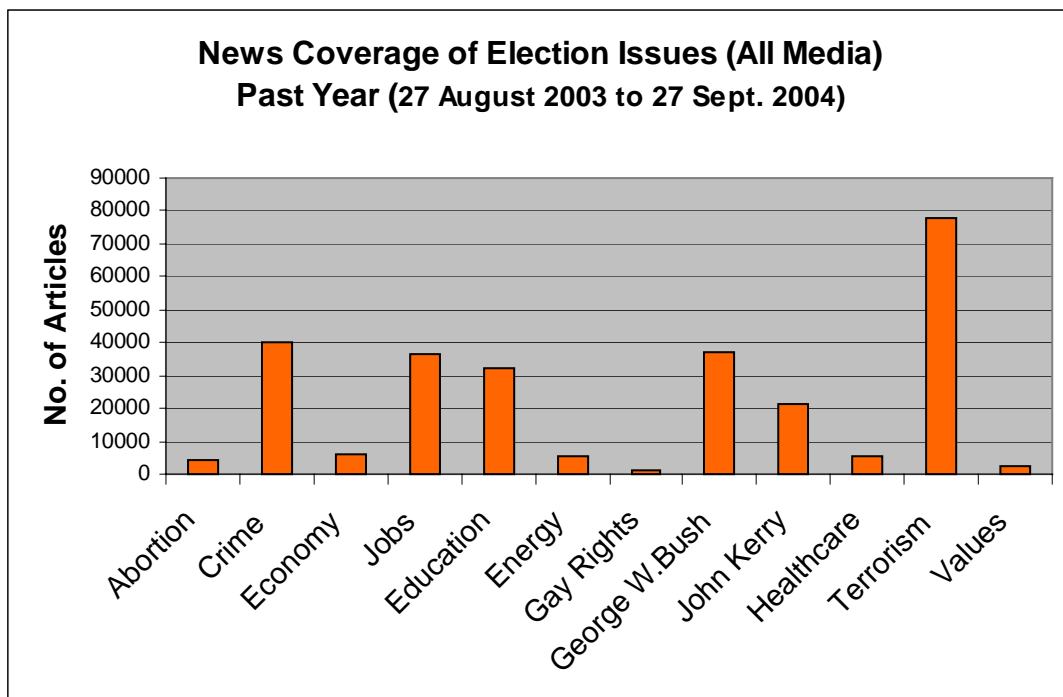
Kerry has often attacked the Bush administration for mishandling Iraq. The Democratic Party campaigns have highlighted the failure of the Bush Administration to get support of an adequate number of allies and the backing of the UN Security Council before sending troops to Iraq. It has also been argued that there was no clear-cut plan to win peace in that country.

Bush has strongly hit back at Kerry, who recently proposed a plan for withdrawal of US troops, trying to paint him as a flip-flopper, as opposed to being a strong leader like him. "Now, almost two years after he voted for the war in Iraq, and almost 220 days after switching positions to declare himself the anti-war candidate, my opponent has found a new nuance," Bush said.

What is significant is that, as during World War I, World War II and the Vietnam War, candidates of both the parties have taken positions that do not differ substantively. The difference of opinion is in degree and subtle nuances. Both Bush and Kerry are seeking to convince the people that they can make America safer and win the peace in Iraq. Positions and views can swiftly change after the election. Both the war on terrorism and the US military presence in Iraq will continue irrespective of who wins the 2004 election for the White House.

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Kerry's Achilles' Heel: A Lacklustre Foreign Policy

By Harsh V. Pant

For the first time in decades, foreign affairs and national security issues have emerged in the US Presidential campaign as greater concerns among voters than economic matters. According to a recent survey by the independent Pew Research Center, 4 in 10 Americans now cite international and defense issues as the most important problems confronting the nation. Only 1 in 4 feels it is the economic issues. Security concerns and foreign affairs have not dominated the US Presidential elections since 1972, the period of Vietnam war. And George Bush has consistently received a higher approval rating vis-à-vis his opponent in tackling the so-called war on terrorism. The threat of terror continues to deeply mould public opinion on the use

of force and the effectiveness of the current Administration. By 56 percent to 38 percent Americans trust Bush more than Kerry to fight terrorism.

With terrorism being the number one priority of the US electorate, it is incumbent upon the contenders for the Presidency to offer credible alternatives on the ways and means of tackling this menace. While Bush has been able to convince a sizeable portion of the populace that he has a plan of action, Kerry has been unable to present a coherent long-term strategy. Kerry seems to be offering the US nothing more than some tactical choices in how with terrorism and Iraq should be dealt with.

Despite Bush's apparent inability to articulate his position well, he has succeeded in laying down a grand strategy for dealing with global terrorism before the people of his country. His strategy may be making most of the states in the international system uncomfortable but a substantial portion of the US electorate seems to be buying into his plan of action. Before 9/11, George W. Bush was seen as being deficient in the "vision thing" much like his father, George H.W. Bush. He had argued vociferously for a "humble foreign policy" in his 2000 Presidential campaign much in line with the mainstream Republican isolationism. However, today Bush's foreign policy agenda is so radical that he has staked his entire Presidency on its success. This foreign policy agenda has been laid out by Bush and his Administration, gradually but consistently, since 9/11.

This agenda is based on a repudiation of moral relativism and an unapologetic assertion of the need for and the possibility of moral judgment in global politics. Bush has made "moral clarity" the hallmark of his foreign policy. He famously declared Iran, Iraq, and North Korea as part of an "axis of evil" and called for tackling these regimes seriously. Bush also declared that in tackling terrorism, pre-emption would become the new policy of the US. The US would strike not in retaliation but in anticipation of an attack as deterrence would not work against shadowy terrorist networks with no nation or citizens to defend.

This led him to argue that a "forward strategy of democracy" is needed to tackle the threat of global terrorism. US, in this view, can only be completely safe when the peoples of the Islamic world also get the same freedom and opportunities as people in every other nation. Not only would the transnational terrorist networks be destroyed by the US but a policy of regime change would also be pursued to prevent political oppression in Middle Eastern societies from giving rise to terrorism. The war on Iraq is also being justified by the US Administration now primarily as part of a larger strategy aimed at the democratization of the entire Middle East. Though many other reasons, such as Iraq's weapons of mass destruction program and Saddam Hussein's links with Al-Qaeda, were cited at the time of the invasion of Iraq, today it is primarily seen as a first step towards setting the entire region on a course towards democratization.

As opposed to this fairly well-laid out foreign policy strategy over the last three years by the Bush Administration, Kerry has failed to come up with a suitable alternative. The fact that he had voted to support the President on the war in Iraq and had defended his decision in the Democratic primaries made his position more precarious. On top of that when he started criticizing the war, he was portrayed as a flip-flopper and indecisive by the Republicans. This led Kerry to challenge Bush on his own turf when he highlighted his Vietnam war credentials during the Democratic Convention and tried to argue that he would be a better commander-in-chief than Bush. However, he came under sharp attack from some Vietnam veterans who challenged his depiction of his Vietnam war performance and denounced him for voicing his protest against the Vietnam war.

As a consequence, while the US public was getting crisp and clear response on how the Bush Administration will deal with terrorism and national security if re-elected, the Kerry campaign was busy firefighting with little time left for crafting a coherent policy alternative. It is only this past week that Kerry finally managed to put his act together and gave a major foreign policy speech in which he staked out his position clearly. In his speech, Kerry challenged Bush's credibility and veracity arguing that by nearly every measure, from attacks on the US forces to the pace of reconstruction to the training of Iraqi security forces, conditions in Iraq are far worse than Bush has acknowledged. He contended that Iraq was never a threat to the US, that the war was never justified, and that the Iraq war was a "profound diversion" from the real enemy, Osama bin Laden. He challenged Bush's assessment of Iraq by arguing that the US is losing the war in Iraq and declared that, if elected, his goal would be to withdraw all US forces within four years and to shift responsibility for Iraq onto other countries, thereby calling upon the UN and other states to play a more central role in Iraq.

What Kerry succeeded in doing with his speech was to position himself as an antiwar candidate and draw sharp contrasts with the Bush Administration's foreign policy. More people would now be able to discern clearly where Kerry stands for on terrorism in general and Iraq in particular. Whereas Bush has argued for tackling not just terrorists but their state sponsors, including a broad forward strategy of intervention against terrorism's root causes in the Middle Eastern authoritarianism, Kerry wants to limit the fight to the battle against Osama bin Laden and his army of terrorists. Kerry's approach also relies heavily on other states' help in managing Iraq. However, there is little evidence of other nations contributing enough troops to significantly decrease US burden in Iraq. Kerry, thereby, opens himself up to the charge that he has no substantive Iraq policy. His contradictory pronouncements also continue which Republicans are losing no time in highlighting again and again. For example, he had earlier said that even if he had known in 2002 that there were no weapons of mass destruction in Iraq, he would still have voted for the use of force. And then this week he pronounced that no one could possibly think, given what we now know, that it was right to have gone to war in Iraq.

But probably the most serious problem with Kerry's approach is that his foreign policy narrative has no grand strategic design to tackle the menace of international terrorism. Whereas Bush offers a very optimistic outlook with his emphasis on freedom and democracy in Middle East and its ability to tackle global terrorism of the jihadi variety, Kerry's approach is pessimism writ large. It demonstrates no real understanding of larger global political trends in so far as terrorism is concerned and a defeatist attitude permeates Kerry's Iraq policy. This has allowed the US public to think that Bush, despite all the current problems in Iraq, will fight the war in Iraq and the larger war against radical Islam with more success. This election has thus become a referendum on Kerry's ability to be a capable commander-in-chief as opposed to it being a referendum on the President's performance in the past four years, which most re-elections are ideally about.

Moreover with 54 percent of the likely voters still believing that the US should stay as long as it takes to rebuild Iraq, Kerry is going against the popular tide and will have to convince the majority why a withdrawal from Iraq is better for US security interests than staying put. From all accounts it seems clear that the voters recognize that the US faces a new threat to its security from a very different kind of an enemy and this to a certain extent justifies the paradigm shift in the US foreign policy that Bush has initiated.

Kerry faces an uphill task in veering the voters towards his more traditional take on US foreign policy in the next month. But a month is a long time in politics, especially in an electoral race this close and the ground situation in Iraq remains unpredictable. Kerry, with the help of a new set of advisors, has also sharpened his attacks on Bush's foreign policy in recent days. If Kerry can succeed in reorienting the debate on foreign policy and national security on his own terms, he may yet derail Bush's reelection prospects. But as of now Kerry's lackluster performance on the foreign policy front has given Bush the upper hand on national security and foreign policy, thereby making his reelection that much easier. If this election continues to be a referendum on Kerry's national security credentials, then Kerry is fighting a losing battle.

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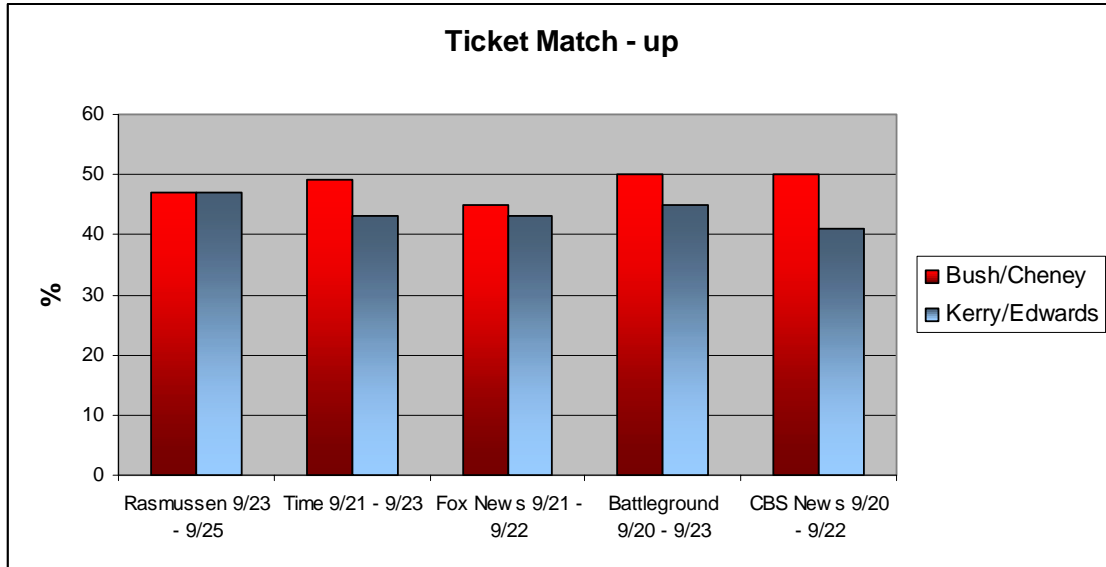
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Poll Analysis: Counting down to The Big Fight

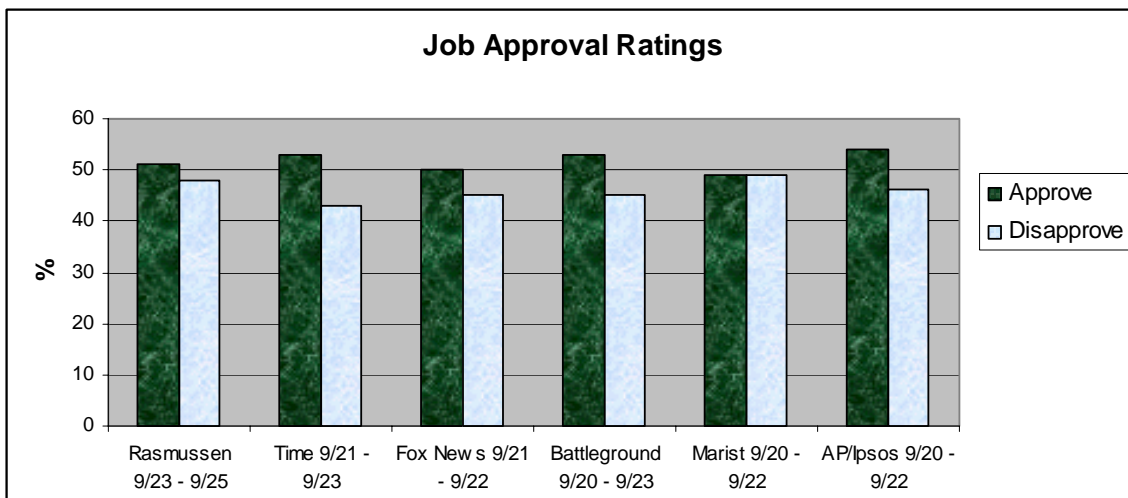
The last week has been interesting on a number of accounts, most important of which were the speeches of Senator Kerry and President Bush. In carefully coordinated campaign events, both candidates made significant stump speeches in New York City during the week of the annual UN summit. Of course the immediate aims for either campaign were diagonally different. For Senator Kerry it was important to contrast and compare his views on Iraq with those of President Bush – on a stage when the national and international media would be more discerning. Importantly, he shifted the focus back to campaign issues, launching an attack on the administration's Iraq policy rather than concentrating on his Vietnam record to build his national security credentials. The Kerry camp was guardedly ecstatic over the Senator's well received foreign policy speech at New York University. The Kerry camp was happy on two counts; the way the speech was delivered by the candidate as well as how well it was written. Criticized often over the excessive use of nuances to explain his positions, the speech that Senator Kerry delivered at the University was precise and attacked the administration's positions cogently.

President Bush's speech at the United Nations was used to reaffirm the administration's policies in Iraq and in Afghanistan whilst reaffirming his administration's commitment to work alongside the United Nations. A scheduled photo-op with the Iraqi Prime Minister, Ayad Allawi, also helped underscore the administration's commitment to Iraq despite the recent beheadings in Iraq of two American hostages.

Ironically, despite Senator Kerry's well received talk and the difficult situation ordinary Americans and soldiers in Iraq face, the President continues to lead Senator Kerry in the national polls. A recent CNN survey reveals that if the elections were to be held today the President would romp home with 301 electoral votes as compared to 237 for Senator Kerry. The Bush camp also has reason to cheer over the consistently steady numbers in the ticket match up of the candidates and their running mates in the President's favour.



For the Kerry camp, time is indeed of the essence considering there is barely a month remaining for Election Day. Some signs of panic are already discernable. Just this past week, the Kerry camp pulled out advertisements from four states that were leaning toward President Bush, in what can only be seen as a defensive move. The Democrats now appear to be more concerned with retaining base support rather than making inroads into the opposition's territory.



Most importantly, the Kerry camp should push the case that this campaign must not be a referendum on President Bush's job approval but rather on the question of who would be more competent as President of the United States. Here, they can gain some comfort from the President's job approval ratings which, despite his lead in the ticket match – up, has not increased significantly.

All now depends on the Presidential Debates, with many of those polled saying that they are waiting to see how the two candidates match up head-to-head before making up their minds.

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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 fifteen 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.

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