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Election 2004: State of the Races

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With just over three weeks left before Election Day, what are the presidential candidates doing to win over voters? How much have the past three debates impacted the electorate? What are the Senate and House races to watch?

Charles Cook, editor and publisher of the Cook Political Report, was online to discuss the 2004 election and politics in general.

The transcript follows.

Editor's Note: Washingtonpost.com moderators retain editorial control over Live Online discussions and choose the most relevant questions for guests and hosts; guests and hosts can decline to answer questions.

Berwyn, Ill.: With unprecedented numbers of newly registered voters all across the country, aren't ALL polls essentially irrelevant?

Charles Cook: Virtually all the polls you are seeing are using random digit dialing, not voter registration rolls, so theoretically even newly registered voters are being polled. A far bigger problem is that as many as 18 percent of telephone subscribers today have no land lines, and since pollsters are not calling cell phones, almost one in five voters are not being included in poll samples.

Unrelated to your question, my advice to people is to not pay too much attention to any one poll, there is a temptation to cherry pick, to focus on the one or two polls that tell you what you want to see happen the most, and ignore all others as methodologically flawed. I would look at the averages of polls that are published in various places, an average of many polls is most likely to give you a truer picture than any one.

Miami, Fla.: What presidential race do you see as the closest historical analogy to the way the current one is unfolding in regards to the support the incumbent and the challenger? What were the ultimate drivers in the last few weeks of that (those) election(s)?

Charles Cook: I have never seen a presidential election that was much like any previous one. When I hear people doing that, it takes less than 15 seconds to come up with dozens of reasons why they are different. Each race should be judged on its own basis, every year is different, every candidate is different, every campaign is different, the circumstances are different.

If I could know one thing, it would be what the news coverage, specifically from and about Iraq for the next few weeks is likely to be. President Bush cannot survive another week like the news and developments last week.

Richmond, Va.: While it is still somewhat of a long shot for the Dems to retake the Senate, have you been hearing about this wild card possibility: its after the Louisiana special election and Vitter wins, the number is 50-50 in the Senate, Bush wins the White House (so Cheney is the tie breaking vote), could you see Senator Chafee switching parties? This scenario could also work for say a 51-49 in favor of the Republicans and a Kerry win at the White House.

Charles Cook: Republicans began this year with about a 90 percent chance of holding onto their majority (no one has control of the Senate!), it drifted down perhaps as low as 60 or 65 percent by late Spring or early Summer, now I think it is back up to 75 or 80 percent. With the Democratic open seat in Georgia definitely going Republican and the Republican open seat in Illinois definitely going Democrat, those two are a wash.

After that, Democrats have seven seats in play, open seats in Florida, Louisiana, North Carolina and South Carolina, all extremely close right now, plus another that is virtually even, Minority Leader Tom Daschle in South Dakota. Then Democrats have two more in jeopardy, Russ Feingold in Wisconsin and Patty Murray in Washington state. Both are ahead but in some difficulty.

Republicans have three seats that are in that toss up column, appointed incumbent Lisa Murkowski in Alaska and open seats in Colorado and Oklahoma.

All other incumbents look likely to get re-elected, in both parties.

For Democrats to win a majority in the Senate, they have to win eight out of those ten, and the White House so that the vice president could break the tie, or nine out of ten if President Bush is re-elected. That is not impossible, but it is not at all easy.

London, UK: Will it all come down to races in Ohio, Pennsylvania, and Florida?

Charles Cook: A general rule of thumb that some people on both sides use is that whichever candidate wins two out of those three: Florida, Ohio and Pennsylvania, will probably be the next president. While

one can certainly construct other scenarios, it all probability, that will be true.

Philadelphia, Pa.: Dear Mr. Cook,

What is the status of the U.S. Senate race in South Carolina? What forces or events would have to converge for the Democrat to win?

Charles Cook: Fundamentally South Carolina is the most Republican and conservative state in the South and very, very difficult for a non-incumbent Democrat to win. Republican candidate Jim DeMint has stumbled on more than a few issues, for example proposing a National Sales Tax, the figure getting tossed around is 26 cents on the dollar, he's getting hammered pretty hard on this and other things. So far, it isn't quite enough to sink him but this race is pretty close. I would give DeMint an edge but he can't afford any more problems.

Conway, Ark.: I've thought from the beginning that-- despite the 2000 results and re-apportionment of electoral votes Bush-ward--the electoral map slightly favors the Democrats. It seems now that the battle is being fought in states Bush won in 2000--West Virginia, Missouri, Nevada, Colorado, Florida, Ohio--and that Bush's chances for pickups center on Wisconsin, with Pennsylvania and Iowa seemingly in Kerry's column. (New Hampshire and it's less-than-decisive 4 Electoral Votes are pretty safely Kerry...) Of course, there's still time for world events, scandal, or debate split-screen mayhem, but as of this moment in time, how do you call the electoral map battle?

I suppose too if anyone wins Ohio and Florida they'll most likely win the whole thing, but it seems that Kerry has a few more combinations that add up to 270 right now.

Charles Cook: I don't have either candidate anywhere near 270 electoral votes. The only way you can do this is to take state level polling and push states with just one or two point leads into either the red or blue column. Given that a quarter of these polls are complete garbage and another quarter fairly suspect, I think that this exercise is very problematic. Unless someone happens to be privy to the much more sophisticated (and expensive) polling that is being conducted for the two parties, the chances of anyone accurately calling all of the 11 states that we are calling toss ups (Colorado, Florida, Iowa, Minnesota, Nevada, New Hampshire, New Mexico, Ohio, Pennsylvania, West Virginia and Wisconsin) are pretty slim. If the margin in this race is more than one percentage point, the Electoral College vote won't matter, if it is inside of one percent, then there are too many states that are too close and the state level polling, even the good ones, won't be of much use, much less these three-dollar state polls that are flying over the internet.

Centreville, Va.: I have a very hard time understanding how a voter could be undecided at this point in the race. Do you believe that those voters who report to be undecided truly haven't made up their minds? If so, what do you think will ultimately sway them one way or another?

Charles Cook: Great question. I think you can categorize undecided voters into two camps. First, there are people who don't read newspapers, news magazines, news websites and don't watch much television news, who really don't care much for news or politics, but see some obligation to vote anyway. They don't focus until very late, the old adage goes, until after the World Series is over.

The second group are people who are genuinely conflicted, that they are torn between voting the way they normally do, but there is some issue or thing that is holding them back. Let's say a Republican who is really against the war in Iraq, or a Democrat who doesn't like John Kerry personally or is anti-trial lawyer.

There are not many out there who are truly undecided but enough that given how close this race is, will probably decide it.

San Antonio, Tex.: In your opinion, was the Charles Duelfer report used appropriately or inappropriately by the candidates in last Friday's presidential debate?

Charles Cook: I thought the President's interpretation of the report was rather unusual and different from most others, but I don't like to be judgemental about the substance of what these candidates say or do, I try to focus on public opinion and the race itself.

Barboursville, W.Va.: Do you see a wave going to either party in these last weeks? Is it a fact or myth that the undecided go to the challenger? I have heard some say yes and others say no.

Charles Cook: I certainly don't see any wave out there, for either side. Going into the first debate, Kerry was underperforming among women voters, that got corrected in the first debate, closing the gap from, say a six point Bush lead going into the first debate (average of all polls) to about two points right now.

I cannot remember ever seeing a race where a well-known, well-defined incumbent won a half or more of the undecided vote. Generally it is at least two-thirds to three-quarters going to the challenger, somebody was throwing a figure around of 85 percent, don't know if that is right. But as a general rule, undecided voters overwhelmingly break toward challengers, unless the incumbent is relatively unknown, undefined, appointed or something. That's why it is a mistake for people to focus on the spread between the two candidates, the far more relevant figure is the actual vote percentage of the incumbent in a poll (or better, average of polls). If you assume that Nader/others get about two percent of the vote (down

from combined 3.1 percent last time), if President Bush is at 46, 47 or maybe 48 percent of the vote going into election day, he probably loses, 49 percent, on the cusp, 50 percent wins.

Washington, D.C.: How do you currently rate the GOP's chances of holding onto the Senate?

Charles Cook: see earlier answer

Paris France: Dear Mr. Cook:

From the perspective of Western Europe, what would change under a Kerry presidency? Other than more collaboration around Iraq and the Kyoto treaty, how would Kerry handle Europe-USA relations?

Charles Cook: Regardless of who wins the presidential race, Congress is going to remain gridlocked. Most likely Republicans will have a nominal majority in the Senate, but there is no chance that either party will have firm control and in a position to do any serious legislating. In the House, the rules are different, a smaller majority can get things done, though any smaller than what Republicans have now would be a real problem. But the chances of either party being able to move any kind of meaningful agenda through Congress are almost nil.

What that means is that power has to go somewhere, it makes the President race more important, as the executive branch can step into a power vacuum with executive orders, regulatory decisions and other administrative moves and do many things that Congress is unable to do. Thus in lieu of anybody having real control of Capitol Hill, the presidential race becomes more important. I would also argue that state government becomes more important as well, with states stepping into some issues and taking action in the absence of congress addressing problems, electric de-regulation is a good example.

In terms of foreign policy, I think the tone and style of Kerry Administration would be totally different, and somewhat more diplomatic. Having said that, no U.S. President would have signed the Kyoto treaty, the fact that the Senate had already voted 99-0 against it is a clue that it was totally unacceptable to the U.S., the substance would probably be somewhat less than Europe would like to see. The better question is whether Europe would treat initiatives and requests from a Kerry Administration differently than a Bush Administration.

Washington, D.C.: Apparently there's the possibility that if neither presidential candidate garners 270 electoral votes, we could see a Bush-Edwards administration (Republican House re-electing the

President and newly-Democratic Senate electing the Vice President).

Could you please comment on this possibility, and how such an "administration" would affect American politics and government?

Charles Cook: dysfunctional? I think the odds of this happening are very slim.

Charlotte, N.C.: Do you see the possibility of Gore 2000 voters crossing over in significant numbers to vote for Bush?

Charles Cook: The only group that I can think of where there is a significant number of people who voted for Gore last time that will vote for Bush this time are in the Jewish community, and it is hard to tell just how widespread that will be. While I expect Kerry to win an overwhelming majority of the Jewish vote, I suspect it will be a lower percentage than Democrats in past years have won. That's the only group I can think of. The question then is whether that is more or less than the number of Bush 2000 voters going for Kerry.

Milwaukee, Wis.: John Kerry would seem to be in an ideal position to take the presidency. The war is increasingly unpopular, oil prices are rising, jobs have not been created in any significant numbers. Why is it so hard for him to break through and take a lead in the polls? Is it a character question, quite simply that President Bush seems more likeable and trustworthy?

Charles Cook: First and foremost, when an incumbent president is seeking re-election, it is a referendum on the incumbent. Having said that, when challengers have been successful, they have tended to be very interesting people, whose message was perfectly suited for the year in which they were running. In 1976, Jimmy Carter was a very interesting person who had a message (integrity, I'll never lie to you) that was perfectly suited for the first post-Watergate, presidential election. Ronald Reagan was a fascinating person with a perfect message and approach for 1980. Same for Bill Clinton in 1992. Kerry isn't the interesting, compelling person that these people were, in the context of the years in which they were running, I think that is a problem. The Kerry campaign is fine, not the best or worse I've ever seen, though they certainly have been making decisions quicker and made better decisions in last month than before. I also think that the Bush campaign is the best planned and executed, most disciplined presidential campaign that I have ever seen, which has helped keep the President afloat when Iraq and the economy have been real problems.

Silver Spring, Md.: Why are there an even number of electoral votes making a true 269- tie a

possibility.

Isn't that like making the World Series the best of 8?

Charles Cook: You would have to ask Congress that question when they admitted Hawaii and Alaska.

Nashville, Tenn.: I've read that some political rleaders think highly of the Zogby poll.

What do you think of Zogby's poll?

Charles Cook: I think that anyone who puts significantly more weight on any one pollster is making a huge mistake. John Zogby is a terrific guy who works very hard and has had some really good years and other years (2002) that weren't so good. There is a web site that has plotted out each of the major national polls on a graph that indicates that Zogby's polls have been a tad more Democratic than most others, just as Fox/Opinion Dynamics tend to be a bit more Republican than the others. Averages are always better, just stick to polls that are done over the telephone (NOT internet) and conducted by real live people, not "push #1 for Bush, #2 for Kerry...) like Rasmussen or Survey USA. They have no idea of they are interviewing nine years old or not.

London, UK: I have read some analysis suggesting that the presence of ideologically loaded referendums at the polls on election day may sway voters towards a particular stand.. i.e. multiple state referendums on gay marriage will help Bush's candidacy. Is the theory that these referendums "get out" the hard core conservative vote or is there something more deep to this? Could you envision a "backlash" whereby the referendums on gay marriage would bring out hard core left wing supporters?

Charles Cook: There are various referenda out there that could affect turnout in states, single-sex marrage ones, one in Florida that would increase the state's minimum wage that Democrats hope will bring out lower income voters. My hunch is that this will be the highest voter turnout of any presidential race in at least 30 years and that the referenda impact will be negligible.

San Antonio, Tex.: Yesterday's NYT reported, in an article titled, "Worldwide Scrutiny Is Coming to the U.S. National Election," that the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe, based in Poland and supported by the United States, has begun to deploy 160 people across the country.

Apparently, this move has raised hackles among some Republicans, particularly Rep. Jeff Miller, a Florida Republican, who was quoted in the piece as saying, "I hope those people just get on the next

plane out of the United States to go monitor an election somewhere else, like Afghanistan."

What is your opinion about the importance of international monitoring of this year's election, given the Florida fiasco four years ago, the proliferation of new voting machines and technology, and the problems across the nation with states' backup ballots?

Charles Cook: I have to go after this question. I don't think that international supervision will/would have the slightest impact in the world. 160 election observers couldn't monitor the election in Bexar County Texas, let alone the whole US.

We have never had a perfect election, I doubt if any country has. Since most contests are not very close, it hasn't really mattered.

With the advent of new technology and voting systems, there will be problems in the transition, as there is when you have a transition to any new technology. There are still many places with paper ballots, they could have problems too. Voting administration has always been a low priority for most counties (the level in which most election procedures are carried out), somewhere below jail food quality. Temporary, usually older workers, new technology, outdated methods in other places, why shouldn't we expect problems. The problem isn't fraud, it is honest mistakes.

Thanks a lot, I have enjoyed this.

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