Yes or No?
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Political Scientists possess few infallible guides to electoral outcomes. And no wonder! Campaigns confront so many influences, forces and factors--so many variables--that forecasting is always hazardous. The science in political science gets pretty wobbly when elections are the subject.

But one reliable principle does apply in almost every election featuring an incumbent; such elections become a referendum on that incumbent. This year is no different. It is a referendum on the Bush administration. And like all referendums the basic question asked of voters is a yes or no question: should Bush be continued in office or not?

Sometimes referred to as “retrospective voting” this phenomenon of incumbent referendum approaches an iron law of politics: simply stated, the electorate as a whole evaluates past performance in order to judge future performance. If past presidential performance passes muster with a majority of voters, the election is essentially over. That the incumbent is doing an acceptable job is all most voters need to know.

The corollary to this iron law of incumbency is that challengers are always running up hill. Their task is formidable. To win, challengers must first convince voters that the incumbent has failed, and then second persuade those same voters that the challenger would do better if given the chance.

In effect, challengers need two thumbs from the electorate--a “thumbs down” on the incumbent--followed by a “thumbs up” for the challenger. Simply persuading voters that the incumbent should be dumped is not enough. Voters also have to believe that the challenger will be an improvement.

Sometimes the voters seem stuck--inclined to vote against the incumbent, but not yet comfortable with the challenger. This is exactly where the 2004 election is now, and has been since late spring.

The questions about Bush's presidency are widespread. A substantial number of voters have significant doubts about his policies or his performance in office. One key measure of political strength, his approval rating hovers around 50-percent. Worse, perhaps, his “re-elect” support is only 52-percent. And 49-percent of the electorate are dissatisfied with the way things are going in the country.

These are perilous numbers for any incumbent, especially one who lost the popular vote four years ago. And they are made worse for Bush by the uneven economic recovery and controversy over the post war Iraq reconstruction effort.

But weakened as he is, most voters are still not ready to thumb Bush out. Stopping them are doubts about John Kerry. To vote against Bush is to vote for Kerry. And Kerry has not made the sale.

As politically vulnerable as Bush might be, Kerry has not convinced a majority of voters that he would be better. With one thumb down against Bush, Kerry has been unable to get the other thumb up for himself. And
unless he does, many voters with doubts about Bush will either not vote, or will vote only reluctantly for the incumbent. Bush will be re-elected.

Can Kerry still win it? Yes, a Bush win isn’t assured. Kerry can win if he does ultimately make the case that he is up to the job--and that he would be a better president than Bush. Given the doubts about Bush, the electorate seems ready to hear his case.

Will Kerry make that case? Does he know how to make it? That may well be the defining question of the fall campaign.

Bush’s partisans can take consolation that Kerry hasn’t made that case very well so far. Kerry supporters can derive hope from the calendar. There is lots of time left. Races like this one tend to be settled very late.

Does history provide any guidance here? In fact, it does. Two prototypical presidential races frame the possibilities: the 1948 Truman-Dewey contest; and the 1980 battle between Carter and Reagan. In the 1948 race, the incumbent won, while in 1980 the incumbent lost.

Both races had much in common with 2004. In both 1948 and 1980, the incumbent president was under heavy pressure. Both Truman and Carter struggled for re-election against a backdrop of foreign crisis and both Truman and Carter confronted economic turbulence.

But in 1948, the incumbent Harry Truman won despite the electorate's deep doubts about him and his policies. He did so largely because his opponent Tom Dewey never really connected with the voters. The “little man on the wedding cake” as his opponents styled him; Dewey seemed so remote that the electorate stuck with Truman, the devil they already knew.

However, 1980 was a different year with a different script. Incumbent Jimmy Carter went into the race battered and bleeding from a succession of foreign and economic policy reversals. But 1980 voters were also wary of Reagan and nervous about the “California cowboy,” better known as a B movie actor than a serious politician.

Carter led at the Labor Day mark and it was close all the way. But in the end, Reagan managed to erase the doubts about him enough to defeat incumbent Carter comfortably.

Will 2004 be a replay of Truman-Dewey in 1948 in which the embattled incumbent survives--will Bush get to play Harry Truman? Or will 2004 reprise Carter-Reagan in 1980 when the challenger won after all? Will John Kerry play Ronald Reagan? These are roles either man would love to fill. One of them will.

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