

“The 2004 U.S. Presidential Elections in Perspective”
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Thank you for inviting me to speak today. I’ve been asked to talk about the presidential election, but we need to begin with a truism often overlooked by international observers: the U.S. President isn’t nearly as important of a figure as many believe him to be.

Indeed, President Bush may be the “head of state” – but he has fairly limited authority and control over most aspects of U.S. politics.

Domestic Policy. Consider education policy. Most – almost all – decisions of consequence are made at the state and local level. There are 14,442 elected school boards in the United States – and they decide what will be taught and when they’ll be taught. We have no national standards concerning what young people should learn, or when they should learn it. No national tests. No national textbooks. For every dollar spent on K-12 education in America, 94 cents come from the state and local level. And our federal Department of Education employs fewer than 6,000 people, or about the size of three large high schools in America. Even in the wake of the “no child left behind” law, which President Bush signed two years ago, almost all of the educational policymaking in the U.S. remains at the state and local level.

Likewise transportation policy. And zoning policy. Well over 99 percent of the laws in America are written and implemented at the state and local levels. Our law enforcement agencies are primarily local. Our elections are run by local officials, and so on. Certainly, the federal government – mainly the U.S. Federal Courts – sometimes declares state and local laws unconstitutional, but the fact remains that on the vast majority of bureaucratic and legal issues, the President is irrelevant. Presidents never admit this, but it is so.

Foreign Affairs. Of course, the great exception to this irrelevance comes in foreign affairs and military leadership. Local school boards, county road commissions and state legislators are powerless here. The U.S. Constitution splits military powers between the Congress and the President. The Congress approves the structure of the military, provides it funds, and regulates how that money is spent. The Congress also has the power (but not the obligation) to declare war – something it last did in 1942. The President, however, is the Constitutional “Commander in Chief,” and in times of war or national emergency, Congress and the American people defer to the President.

The president has long claimed authority over foreign policy – beginning with President George Washington’s refusal to take sides in European wars – despite sentiment in Congress that the U.S. should side with the French throughout the 1790s. President Lincoln suspended portions of our Constitution during the Civil War; President Franklin

Roosevelt placed Japanese Americans in internment camps during World War II, and the Vietnam War escalated throughout the mid- and late-1960s with little oversight from Capitol Hill.

So, in very rough terms, the President has little control over domestic politics and policy – but quite a bite of power in foreign policy and military affairs. That’s never more true than in times of war and national emergencies. There is, though, a third policy area that falls somewhere between these two – and it is crucial in presidential elections.

Economic Policy. The economy. Presidential elections are often won and lost on the economy. Even some of our oldest campaign promises (“a chicken in every pot”) are about economic prosperity. Yet the President is limited in his ability to control the economy. Nobody – really – “controls” the economy. Rather, U.S. policies can influence domestic and international markets, but the image to have in mind is one of the president riding a wild horse. He can use his spurs – fiscal policy – and his reins – monetary policy – but the ride is still wild and largely random.

We have, then, three areas on which presidents might be judged: domestic policy, foreign/military policy, and economic policy. And you will read countless briefings on each of these. Our domestic policy agenda will be dominated by concerns over (1) health care, (2) gay rights, and (3) social security. Foreign and military policy will revolve around the war in Iraq and ongoing efforts to fight terrorism. Symbolism from 9/11 will overlay both efforts. And economic policy will revolve around (1) whether the economy is recovering (or not), (2) the looming deficit, and (3) trade policies, including the outsourcing of jobs.

We could go on and on at great length discussing each of these issues and the tactical ways each campaign will use them – but I want to return to my first point – that for most Americans – and on most issues – **who** is president really doesn’t much matter. Policies only matter at the margins.

How Voters Decide. What does matter? Trust. Likeability. Of course, voters are more likely to trust and to like candidates with whom they agree, but the correlation is surprisingly weak. In public opinion polls in 2000, George Bush was deemed a more likeable figure than Vice President Gore. Governor William Clinton, first in 1992 and again in 1996, was judged more “likeable” than the first President Bush and Senator Bob Dole, respectively. President Bush the senior was, in turn, rated more likeable in 1988 than Governor Michael Dukakis. The last relatively unlikable character to win the presidency was Richard Nixon in 1972, when he defeated an affable – but politically extreme – Senator George McGovern.

The typical measure of likeability is a president’s “approval rating.” For President Bush today, his approval rating is hovering around 48 percent, meaning about half of Americans approve of the job President Bush is doing. That number has been falling for President Bush since September 2003. Conventional Wisdom has it that an incumbent president probably can’t get reelected with an approval rating below 45 percent.

I encourage you to ignore approval ratings as a measure of how Americans will vote. A campaign is about comparisons between candidates, and President Bush's approval rating means little without a sense for the alternative – Senator Kerry.

It is safe to say that a clear majority of Americans prefer Senator Kerry's policy positions. Senator Kerry called for United Nations involvement in Iraq long before the Bush administration came around to the same view. The Kerry campaign's stand on tax policy is more in line with what Americans want. So too with environmental policy, and trade policy. On issue after issue, Senator Kerry has formulated policy positions that are more palatable to a majority of Americans.

Yet – and this is difficult for foreign observers to comprehend – President Bush is thought to be a more “likeable” figure. National polls currently have Senator Kerry leading President Bush by 5 to 7 percentage points. But when people are asked who they'd rather spend time with, based on their character, people choose George Bush. College students, which as a group support Kerry by 10 percentage points over President Bush, would rather have Bush – not Kerry – as a college roommate. George Bush – though the child of great privilege – comes across to more Americans as a regular fellow. Someone you'd like to have over to watch a football game on TV.

Trust and Likeability loom so large precisely because presidents have so little say over the day-to-day domestic issues that concern most Americans. The president, to most voters, is not the chief administrator of a large bureaucracy. He is our elected nobility, and in a democratic republic such as ours, we yearn for the nobility of the common man.

Swing Voters. Naturally, trust and likeability are intimately linked with whether we believe that a person is “like us,” and in politics, the quickest short-hand way to decide that is to look at their party label.

Roughly 35 percent of Americans who have allegiances to the Democratic Party will vote for Senator Kerry – the Democrat – under almost any circumstances. And roughly 35 percent of Americans – the faithful Republicans – will vote for President Bush no matter what. The country is polarized in partisan camps, but at least 30 percent of the electorate is still persuadable. These swing voters may, depending on the state they live in, have a few pet issues. Missouri and Iowa voters will pay particular attention to agricultural trade policies. Michigan and Pennsylvania voters are sensitive to the outsourcing of jobs, and Wisconsin voters seem exquisitely attuned to the goings-on in Iraq.

In broad terms, again, the issues for swing voters will be Iraq and the economy – and on both of these, President Bush is looking a lot stronger today than he seemed just two weeks ago. Indeed, it is very difficult to unseat an incumbent president, even when his approval ratings are down. In many ways, getting rid of an incumbent is tantamount to admitting that we made a big mistake in the previous election. When the President is an affable fellow – as George Bush seems to be – it's especially hard for Americans to admit

a mistake while also turning on a decent guy. That's the calculus for swing voters, at any rate.

I will, in our time for questions and answers, talk about which states are "in play," and how the campaigns are readying themselves for the battle ground states. We should talk about the fact that only half of our adult citizens will vote this fall. We should talk about the Vice Presidency. We should talk about the national party conventions. But for now, remember that the president is supposed to be a likeable fellow who won't mess things up too much.

After all, politics in America is about local government. It's about what textbooks we're using in our schools, whether the roads will be repaved, and how quickly our homes are increasing in value. The president is supposed to be a benign friend who we'd like to imagine could drop by for dinner anytime. As for the textbooks, roads and housing values in Iraq – well – that's not something most American's will spend much time worrying about.