

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.



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In this issue

- **Why India should prefer Kerry**
- **Manmohan Singh builds India's case, impresses global leaders**
- **The First Presidential Debates: Kerry Still in the Race**
- **Poll Analysis**

REJOINDER

Why India should prefer Kerry

By Sumit Ganguly

There has been much fervid commentary in responsible sections of the Indian press about what a Kerry presidency might mean for Indo-U.S. relations. Kerry starts with a concept of America's role in the world that places much more weight on diplomacy, consensus-building, and the role of international institutions than the current administration. This outlook, and his efforts to apply it to America's most painful foreign policy problem in Iraq, appear to be more congenial to Indians than that of the current administration. Three different concerns have generated most of the discussions in the Indian press: that the Kerry administration would try and roll back the Indian nuclear and ballistic missile programs, that it would seek to end outsourcing and that it would take a more meddlesome stance on the Kashmir question. How realistic are these assessments, both positive and negative?

The peculiarities of American electoral politics systematically distort foreign policy issues, which are playing an uncharacteristically large role this year. An American presidential campaign lasts the better part of two years, with escalating overblown campaign rhetoric a staple of both major political parties. Thoughtful and carefully crafted arguments give way to sound bites in phenomenally expensive television advertisements. The post-September 11 security consciousness of the American electorate has an even lower than usual tolerance for nuance. This has affected the discourse of even as cerebral a politician as John Kerry and as astute a running mate as John Edwards, especially in light of the ruthless campaign strategy of their opponents.

Kerry's vision of America's relationship with the rest of the world emerges most clearly from his discussions of Iraq and of America's ties with its allies. He accuses Bush of pursuing unrealistic, stubborn and headstrong policies in Iraq, and willfully disregarding America's need to mobilize allies in a difficult endeavor. His accusations of incompetence, arrogance and stubbornness suggests the standard against which he wishes to be judged. If elected, he clearly intends to make the most of his opportunity to bring a new beginning to the tangled problems in Iraq and more broadly in the Middle East, and to do it with as much help as he can muster from the rest of the world. His concept of multilateralism may not match the level of deference to the United Nations that Indian governments have espoused in the past, but it would provide a context for meaningful U.S.-India consultations on the problems of the world and for a new kind of cooperation (not necessarily military) in a region close to India's coastline and heart.

A careful reading of Kerry's senatorial and campaign records suggests that Indian worries about some of the Democratic administration's specific policies are exaggerated.

Take the nuclear issue first. The Democrats have historically taken a harder line than the Republicans on nuclear nonproliferation, but even before the Clinton Administration left office, it had, in practice, accepted India's nuclear status. There is little or nothing in Kerry's background that suggests that he would now adopt an intransigent position. He is interested in multilateral arms control. He has quite correctly and courageously criticized the administration's preoccupation with the development of a new generation of nuclear weapons, the so-called "bunker-buster bombs," which he believes would waste money and encourage a reckless arms race. Like every President for the past forty years, he has supported the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty(NPT). But the principal thrust of his foreign policy argument, on and off the campaign trail, has been that the United States needs to base its policies on reality, and to work with other countries. Given the reality of India's nuclear program and the revolution in India-U.S. relations that started under Clinton, this is more likely to lead to enhanced U.S. efforts to make common cause with India in preventing the spread of nuclear technology to new and dangerous customers than to any effort to turn back the clock.

On the second issue, outsourcing, both Kerry and Edwards, while on the campaign trail, have made a set of careless and perhaps ill-considered remarks. Their remarks about the costs of outsourcing to the American worker were basically an effort at product differentiation. With unemployment stubbornly refusing to go down, with college graduates increasingly facing an uncertain professional future and with communities ravaged by plant closings, the Bush administration's sole remedy appears to be more of the same: continued corporate subsidies and generous tax cuts for the supremely wealthy. More to the point for the Indian observer, the Kerry-Edwards remedy is primarily aimed at U.S. corporate taxation. Their proposal would end what they regard as artificial tax incentives for outsourcing. This would not end outsourcing; it would not even cut significantly into the market for outsourced services. Nothing in Kerry's or Edwards' record suggests that they would cross that line.

On the hypersensitive question of Kashmir, the current administration has taken a more hands-off policy on public discussions of human rights issues than some of its predecessors. But it is hard to discern any real difference in the thrust of the India-Pakistan diplomacy of the Clinton and Bush administrations. Neither wanted the *status quo* changed through force; both have been keen to see India and Pakistan make serious moves toward peace and toward reducing the risk of nuclear war

through miscalculation; both have been prepared to facilitate, but not mediate, India-Pakistan dialogue if both sides wanted them involved; and neither, for better or for worse, devoted very significant diplomatic resources to the effort, except in times of crisis. Both have been fundamentally more concerned with regional peace than with the particulars of a putative deal, but would, in principle, like to see the Kashmiris find a stronger voice in the process and in an eventual settlement. In any event, as any good MEA (Ministry of External Affairs) bureaucrat will tell one in private conversations, India is too big to be pushed around.

The Kerry team's campaign statements offer few real clues about how a Democratic administration would deal with Pakistan. Clearly, the relationship with Pakistan will remain important to any American administration's anti-terrorism efforts. But the Democrats are likely to take a harder line than the Republicans on Pakistan's biggest policy problems: the government's ambivalent approach to indigenous Islamic extremists, the army's overgrown role in politics, and any reopening of the nuclear bazaar.

The revolution in Indo-U.S. relations that began with the Clinton visit in 2000 has become a consensus point on the U.S. political scene. In contrast to the situation in the early 1990s, political candidates, legislators, and administrations of both parties take it as a given that the United States needs to work closely with India. The same consensus seems to be developing in India, as evidenced by the easy transition of the bilateral relationship from a BJP to a Congress-led government in New Delhi. Concerns about whether "those other guys" will understand the importance of the relationship are natural, but in the event of a Kerry-Edwards victory, India should prepare itself to cooperate with the new political dispensation in Washington, DC without a set of "mind-forged manacles," to borrow William Blake's evocative phrase. Otherwise India will needlessly be chasing after imaginary bugbears to the detriment of its own vital national interests.

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SPECIAL REPORT

Manmohan Singh builds India's case, impresses global leaders

By Seema Sirohi

The annual pilgrimage by Indian prime ministers to attend the United Nations General Assembly often results in a mix of predictable pronouncements and heated exchanges over Kashmir.

But this year was different. Prime Minister Manmohan Singh's trip to New York was markedly unlike others in the past in both content and tenor. He launched new initiatives, engaged President George Bush in a substantive, forward-looking plan and exhorted American CEOs to become partners in the mega infrastructure projects in India. Despite controversies back home over engaging "foreign advisers" in India's planning process, he stayed "on message," to use a term popular in American politics, giving his audiences a flavour of the new India. He walked a fine line between India's strong support for multilateralism and the United Nations and its desire to build a partnership with the United States, currently seen by many countries as a superpower high on the steroid of uni-lateralism.

For a man seen by the opposition as a "short-term" prime minister, Singh was brimming with a quiet confidence and unperturbed by the many mini revolutions against him back home. He was a man with an agenda and a desire to fulfill it. In

some ways, he seemed akin to Bush in the implicit faith he showed in his ideas -- except that his ideas are more grounded in reality. Apart from a substantive hour-long breakfast with Bush, Singh also met one-on-one with Pakistan's President Pervez Musharraf and discussed "options" to resolve the festering problem of Kashmir. He established a rapport with both, painting a vision of the future rather than wasting time in sorting out the past.

His theme for Indo-US relations was simple -- "the best is yet to come." He said the two countries may have their differences over Iraq, trade talks and how to fight the war on terror but they can work together in areas of convergence.

As for Pakistan, he leaped over the chasm and asked Musharraf to get back to him with ideas for a solution to the Kashmir problem. He recalled an Urdu couplet for Musharraf which talked of how mistakes made in moments today can result in retribution for decades. The message was clear -- not only do the two leaders have an immense responsibility to work for a peaceful solution, their peoples are now active participants in making peace.

Musharraf's speech to the UN was a positive omen at the start of the week. He mentioned Kashmir as an issue but did not go into the belligerent anti-India rhetoric that is the hallmark of Pakistani speeches at the United Nations. Apparently, an agreement had been worked out between JN Dixit and Tariq Aziz, the two national security advisers, that Pakistan would refrain from stridency and condemnation of India. Dixit had made it clear that if Pakistan vitiated the atmosphere as it did last year, holding a summit meeting Singh and Musharraf would be a "waste of time."

The message was received loud and clear. As a result, the meeting was held in an atmosphere of bonhomie and magnanimity. Singh gave Musharraf the "honour" of reading out the joint press statement after their meeting, and later called the meeting "historic" and "a new beginning." But Singh wasn't soft on the one issue that prevents a breakthrough -- cross-border terrorism. At a press conference, Singh was clear as day in his expectations of Pakistan. He told Musharraf "unambiguously" that eliminating cross border terrorism was "a precondition" for moving forward. The two leaders agreed to look at "all options" with an open mind.

It was apparent that the back channel between Dixit and Aziz was working well in cutting through the fog of misunderstandings and creating a broad framework for moving forward. The next four to five months will be crucial as the two foreign secretaries and foreign ministers meet before the next encounter between Singh and Musharraf in Dhaka next January on the sidelines of the SAARC summit.

One of the major successes of Singh's trip was the signing of Phase I of the Next Steps in Strategic Partnership (NSSP), an agreement designed to increase cooperation between India and the US in high-technology trade, civilian space programmes, civilian nuclear activities and missile defence. The complex deal is a series of mutual obligations which the two countries will undertake to build a new paradigm for the coming years. The agreement is the beginning of the end of the "sanctions era" which began with the imposition of comprehensive US sanctions against India after the 1998 nuclear tests. The completion of Phase I resulted in the removal of ISRO headquarters from the sanctions list. As a result, US licensing requirements for sales to Indian companies will be far fewer.

Kenneth Juster, Undersecretary of Commerce, put it eloquently when he wrote in *The Wall Street Journal* last week: "The NSSP is grounded in the realization that what unites us is stronger than what divides us. It acknowledges India's role as a major power, while appreciating that it takes time to build a lasting strategic partnership. It sets up a process to create and build upon successes, while

establishing habits of cooperation that extend deep into the governmental fabric of both countries.” Juster was a prime mover on the US side in pushing the agreement which took nearly a year to conclude. Both Indian and US officials consider it a significant step forward in the constantly evolving partnership.

Speaking to the Council on Foreign Relations, a premier think tank, the Prime Minister said that a “real partnership requires more than just a shared commitment to democracy.” He argued the case for the two countries to work together to create a new structure of global cooperation in which India has a “due place.” The message was clear -- the US must support India’s candidacy for permanent membership in the UN Security Council. While Singh did not ask Bush directly for support, his initiative with Germany, Japan and Brazil under the rubric of G-4 was clear enough to the Americans.

The four countries launched a joint initiative to support each other’s candidacy and pool their resources to push for reforms within the United Nations. Pressure is building within the General Assembly to create a more equitable system which represents a wider slice of the world at the decision-making level. The US-led war in Iraq has helped focus attention on the United Nations and the need for it to be a more effective body.

If India and the US have to go into the future as lasting partners, more initiatives are needed to cement the relationship. Singh’s impatience with the current situation was apparent in every speech he made. His recurring point was that India must occupy a spot on the decision makers’ table if the US wants India to make more commitments on the global stage.

Prime Minister Singh also visited the New York Stock Exchange (NYSE) -- the first Indian prime minister to do so -- and spoke to American CEOs at an exclusive luncheon. He appealed to them to invest in India, earning the wrath of some Left party leaders back home who criticized him for being a “salesman.” Calm in the face of unfounded criticism, he merely pointed them back to the language of the Common Minimum Programme (CMP) which calls for foreign investments. He also mentioned that Left-ruled states such as West Bengal are eagerly courting foreign investments.

What came across was a man who was comfortable not only with the issues but also with himself. There was no circumlocution, no flashy jabs at the opposition and no underhand repartee. He came across as supremely secure in his ideas.

[Seema Sirohi is Washington Correspondent for Outlook and Ananda Bazaar Patrika]

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The First Presidential Debate: Kerry Still in the Race

By Harsh V. Pant

The first Presidential debate between George Bush and John Kerry was one of the most substantive debates ever held in the US Presidential elections. It was also a clear demonstration of the choices that the US voters face in the coming elections. Despite its scripted nature, the debate turned out to be extremely illuminating about the different styles and different policy frameworks of the two contenders to the highest executive office in the US.

This is the first election since Vietnam where foreign policy is the dominating theme. The war in Iraq and concerns about terrorism continue to trump domestic socio-economic issues for most voters. The Democrats have traditionally been seen as strong on the domestic agenda and weak on national security issues. The opposite

has largely been true for the Republicans. And therefore, the Grand Old Party had an advantage going into these elections. With George Bush declaring himself as a President at war, there was a hope that people would rally around the flag and make it difficult for the Democrats to make a dent.

The Democrats, on the other hand, operated under the belief that with the US economy not doing well, and the war in Iraq not under control, they can challenge the President with some credibility. John Kerry tried to project himself as having better commander-in-chief credentials with his Vietnam War record and tried to challenge the Republicans on their own turf. But he faced a barrage of criticism from some Vietnam War veterans and the Republicans were able to caricature him as a flip-flopper, unable to take a decisive stand on crucial issues of war and peace.

The first Presidential debate was, therefore, crucial for John Kerry who had been running behind Bush in polls for some weeks now. For the Republicans, there was a prospect that Bush might be able to seal the race with his performance, more so because foreign policy is widely perceived to be his strength. The Democrats were nervous as only a minor slip by John Kerry would have virtually ended any hope for him.

This debate was preceded by elaborate negotiations to prevent the unseemly outbreak of anything debate-like but in the end the format proved quite effective. This was especially true for Kerry who is used to giving speeches with long-winded sentences. The imposition of time-limit for making comments helped in to fine tune his arguments in a crisp and precise manner.

The broad argument that Bush made was that Kerry is not capable of being a strong leader and would not be able to effectively deal with the threats that the US is facing in a post-9/11 world. He also justified the war in Iraq primarily as part of a larger strategy aimed at the democratization of the entire Middle East, as a first step towards setting the entire region on a course towards democratization. Kerry, in contrast, tried to argue that Bush made a "colossal error of judgment" in invading Iraq as Iraq was not a central front in the war on terror and pounded the President for the mismanagement of post-conflict situation in Iraq.

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. The debate also focused on issues as wide-ranging as how best to deal with a nuclear North Korea, the likelihood and nature of US intervention to prevent genocide in Sudan, and when and how should the US go in for pre-emptive military action.

It was Kerry who had more at stake in this debate and he performed fairly well. He articulated his position clearly, perhaps for the first time, even acknowledging his mistake of making his infamous comment on voting for a war appropriation before he voted against it. He was, rather surprisingly, also able to keep Bush on the defensive. His body language reflected a confidence that comes with the mastery of policy minutiae.

George Bush, on the other hand, appeared testy, at times irritated by the points being made by Kerry almost as if the debate was an intrusion on his time. He was on message, no doubt, hammering away at his campaign themes again and again. But after a point, it almost seemed as if he has nothing more substantive to say. He was also not candid about the situation on ground in Iraq while he stressed his own resoluteness in dealing with that situation.

Kerry, in many ways, was successful in sounding aggressive enough to take Bush head on while being respectful of the troops fighting in Iraq. This is a difficult position to be in. Yet most would agree that he gave his best performance ever. But while Bush may not have been as eloquent or as sharp on details, he talked directly to the American people and drove home the center-piece message of his campaign strategy that Kerry by sending “mixed messages” is not helping US security interests and only Bush’s resolute leadership can serve the US best. He also retains the advantage of being a wartime President seeking reelection and a vote of confidence in the war he initiated.

In the opinion polls conducted immediately after the debate, most seemed to think that Kerry “won” the debate. But this winning should be viewed in proper context. In the first Presidential debate of the 2000 elections, most people thought that Al Gore won the debate which did not help Gore much in the end. Also, instant polls have little validity in these elections where opinions have already strongly crystallized along party lines.

Meanwhile, 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. And 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 sounds defeatist and pessimistic about the future.

What Kerry was able to do in the first debate was to live to fight another day. A perception was growing, even among the Democrats that the race to the White House was almost over with no hope for Kerry. Kerry has proved that he remains very much in the fray. He will now have to perform equally well, if not better, in the remaining two debates. The election has become just a bit more exciting.

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Presidential Debates FAQ

When was the first known instance of a debate between two candidates for political office?

The first campaign Debates were held in 1858 between Abraham Lincoln (former Congressman from Illinois) and Sen. Stephen A Douglas, (Ill.), both of whom were standing for elections to the U.S. Senate. Seven debates were held across the state with each debate lasting for three hours; the first candidate spoke for one hour; the second for one and a half hours; and the first the right to reply for half and hour. Candidates alternated going first. Lincoln lost the elections.

What about subsequent debates?

Only two debates were held, in 1948(Primaries) and 1956(Primaries), till 1960 when the first televised Presidential debates were held between Sen. John F. Kennedy and Vice President Richard M. Nixon. Four debates were conducted, each focusing on a different issue. The power of television was apparent in those early days itself when those who watched the debate on television felt that Kennedy had “won” while the radio audience were of the opinion that Nixon had

performed better. Kennedy won the elections by a narrow margin. The next Presidential debate was held only in 1976 since Nixon's bad experience with the 1960 debate led him to veto any such proposal in 1968 and 1972.

Television had been around since 1927 so why were no debates televised before that?

It was only in 1960 that Congress suspended the equal time provision of the Communications Act of 1934, to allow a two man debate. The Act stated that a broadcasting station permitting a candidate use of its facilities had to give an equal opportunity to all other candidates for that office. To put that in a present day context, all the twelve odd candidates at present on the ballot would have had to be accommodated in the Presidential Debates.

Who conducts the Presidential Debates?

This has been a contentious issue right from 1960 and is closely related to the broadcast provisions. In 1970, Congress passed a comprehensive Campaign Reform Bill which also repealed Section 315 of the Communications Act which contained the equal time provisions. But that Bill was vetoed by Nixon. The Federal Communications Commission (FCC) then in 1975 created a loophole, classifying debates as "bona fide news events." That meant if the debates were to be sponsored by an organisation other than the broadcast networks, coverage of such a "news event" was exempt from the equal time requirements. The **League of Women Voters** offered to "sponsor" or conduct the debates, and did so till 1988, when sponsorship was taken over by the **Commission on Presidential Debates**, a bipartisan committee formed by the two political parties. (The Committee calls itself non-partisan but its co-chairmen are former presidents of the Republican and Democratic parties). This has led to much criticism on the grounds that the Commission puts the candidates' interests first and not the voters. The two main political parties are able to manipulate many aspects of the debate including deciding on format, choice of moderator and camera angles. In 1996, they also maneuvered to keep candidate Ross Perot off the debates though he had got 19% of the popular vote in 1992 and had participated in the Presidential Debates that year.

How much does it cost to conduct a Presidential Debate and where does the money come from?

Each debate costs around \$2.5 million to conduct, and money is collected through corporate contributions.

Do debates have any impact on voters?

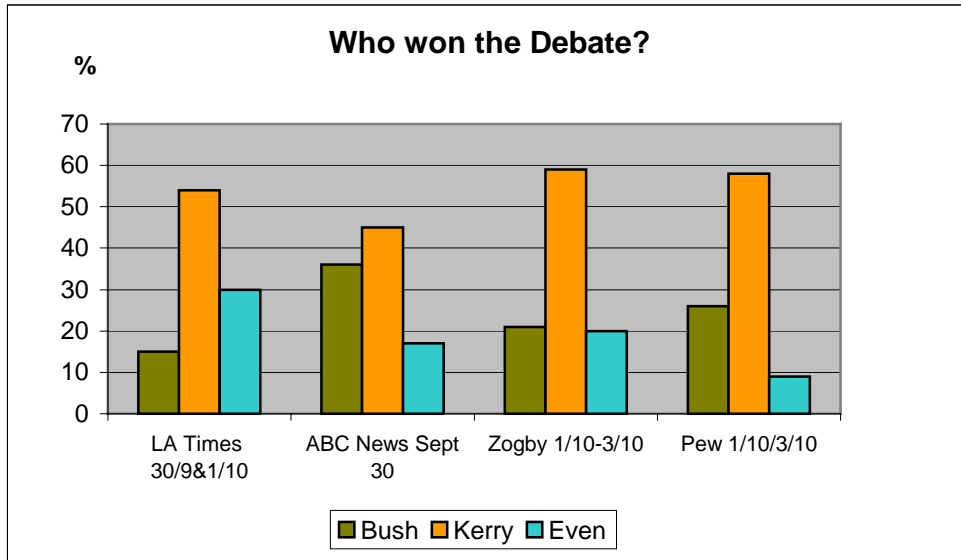
Though scientific studies differ on how much the debates affect voting behaviour, there is much criticism that the issues debated by the two candidates are lost in the post-debate media analysis where the emphasis is laid on how the candidates presented themselves, and the tendency to play up the gaffes made by the candidates during the course of the debate.

In the 1976 presidential debates, for instance, President Ford's remark that "there is no Soviet domination of Eastern Europe" was played up by the media and is thought to have played a part in his defeat that year.

In the ultimate analysis, as a political analyst points out, "debates are a test of peripheral skills, clearly not trivial ones but not the skills central to whether someone has the wisdom and ability to govern well."

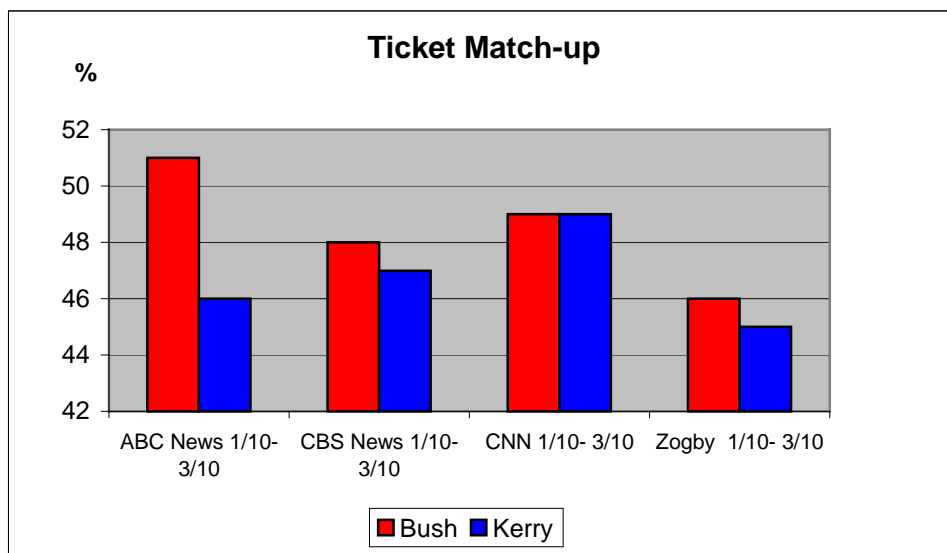
Poll Analysis: Talking Heads make a difference

If this week, much space in the media was devoted to the first Presidential Debates in Florida, the pollsters were not far behind, with five polls coming out within a matter of days of the debate, with America's take on the two candidates. And the new question posed by pollsters, "Who won the debate?" was largely answered with "Kerry".

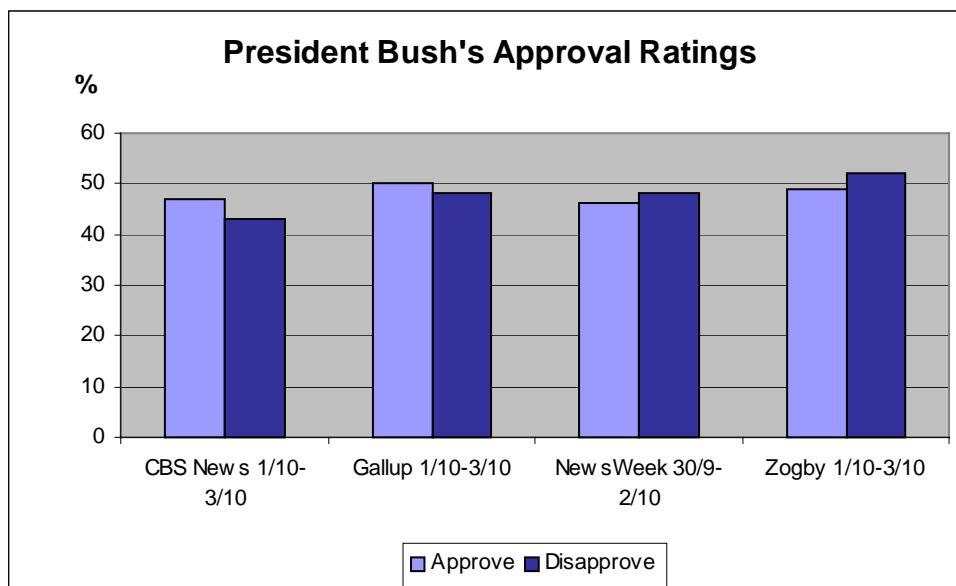


The amount of voter interest in the current elections was manifested by the record numbers of viewers who tuned into the Presidential Debates on Thursday. 63 million Americans watched the Debates live, a much higher number as compared to the 46 million who watched the first Presidential Debate in the 2000 campaign.

The debates threw up a new set of questions for pollsters; chief among which was whether a president Kerry would cede control over foreign policy and national security issues to either allies or the United Nations. This followed his "global test" statement during the debate which the Republican campaign managers went to town over, immediately coming out with a campaign ad painting Kerry as a man just waiting to become President so that he could hand over control of American foreign policy issues to foreign countries.



However, President Bush still holds the lead in the overall ticket match-up despite what was universally acknowledged to be a miserable showing at this first of three verbal jousts with Kerry. What the first Presidential debates have done is close the gap between the two candidates and bring to an end the post-convention bump that President Bush had been riding till now.



Tailpiece: In what can only be described as an extreme step at analyzing voting trends, one of the questions posed by the Zogby poll is: "If your car was broken down on the side of the road, who do you think would be more likely to help you?" For the record, nearly one in three (32%) suggested Kerry, while two in five (40%) suggested Bush.

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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 seventeen 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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