

# Kick-Starting the Race

*The Democratic Convention and women voters*

By David W. Moore



AP/Wide World Photos

The Democratic Convention was a key event in the 2000 election. Vice President Al Gore began the convention trailing Texas Governor George W. Bush by landslide proportions, but emerged on a highly competitive basis for the first time in the campaign. When Gore's convention "bounce" in the polls did not fade, but persisted for the next several weeks, many political commentators opined that Gore had used the convention to "solidify his base," thus making the race roughly parallel to the almost equal division in party affiliation among American voters.

But a detailed analysis of pre- and post-convention polls suggests a somewhat different dynamic. While Gore did see increased support among his own party members, it did not equal the levels of support Bush enjoyed

from his party voters. Much more important was the fact that Gore attracted increased support from both Republicans and Democrats, and that this increase came primarily from women. The gender gap more than doubled after the convention, becoming one of the largest ever recorded in an election campaign.

From the time Texas Governor George W. Bush emerged as a serious presidential candidate in 1999 until the Democratic Convention in late August 2000, he led Vice President Al Gore in every CNN/*USA Today*/Gallup poll. The first post-impeachment poll, in February 1999, showed Bush leading Gore by 11 points among adults across the country. Through the rest of that year, Bush enjoyed an average lead of 15 percentage points, ranging from a low of nine points to a high of 17.

The first indication of Bush vulnerability came shortly after the new year,

when Arizona Senator John McCain emerged as a serious challenger for the Republican nomination. Initially in 2000, Bush maintained his electoral dominance over Gore,<sup>1</sup> but the first general election poll after the New Hampshire Primary—which Bush lost to McCain by 18 percentage points—showed Bush's lead over Gore at nine points. Ten days later it was down to five points, and over the next several months, through the middle of July, Bush's lead averaged just over six points, significantly below the 15-point margin he had enjoyed the previous year.

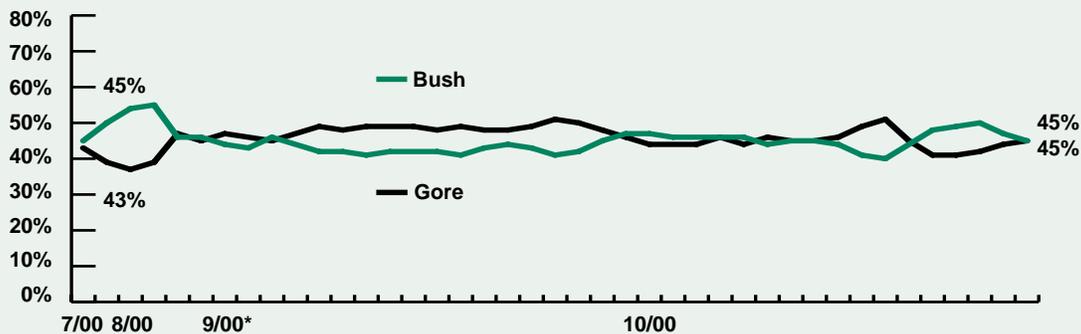
A turning point in the campaign occurred during the Republican and Democratic conventions. Going into the convention, Bush gained support as the news media gave positive coverage to the upcoming activities and to the choice of Richard Cheney as the vice presidential candidate. Just before the GOP Convention began, Bush was leading Gore by 11 points, and just after the GOP Convention, he had a 17-point lead.<sup>2</sup> Bush's lead the next week, right before the Democratic Convention, was virtually the same at 16 points, but a week later—after the Democratic Convention—the race was a dead heat. The following week, Gore maintained his competitive stance with Bush, and as Labor Day came and went, it became clear: this was a new presidential race.

The most substantial change in the race was, of course, in the actual support levels of the two candidates. From a 16-point lead to a one-point deficit marked a stunning 17-point change within just one week. Over a longer period, the perceptions of American voters also changed about which candidate they expected to win the elec-

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Figure 1

## The Race Becomes a Dead Heat



\*Daily tracking poll begins.

Note: Responses of likely voters.

Source: Surveys by Gallup/CNN/USA Today, latest that of October 8-10, 2000.

tion. Before the Republican Convention, 68% of voters said they thought Bush would win, and only 25% thought Gore would. Just after the Democratic Convention, expectations were a little less lopsided, as now Bush led by 49 to 34%. Three weeks later, in mid-September, voters perceived Gore as the likely winner in November by a margin of 54 to 33%.

Political Science election models that take into account presidential popularity, the actual state of the economy, and public perceptions of the economy were predicting that Gore would be the winner in November even when he was trailing Bush by double digits. One might expect that, given the importance of the economy in these models, it would also be a major factor in Gore's emergence as a competitive candidate after the Democratic Convention. However, polling data do not necessarily support such a hypothesis. In a July poll before the GOP Convention, 74% of Americans rated current economic conditions in the country as either excellent (26%) or good (48%), the highest rating since the question was first asked in January 1992. Yet, in that same poll, Gore trailed Bush by 11 percentage points, suggesting that, however good the economy was, Gore was not benefiting politically from it.

This inference is supported by a more direct comparison of economic ratings before and after the Democratic Convention, showing that Americans do not see a great deal of difference in the economy between now and 1992, when Bill Clinton and Al Gore were first elected primarily because of what was then widely perceived as a failing economy. At that time Americans gave low ratings both to the economy and to President Bush's handling of the issue, and the Clinton campaign's unofficial slogan was the oft-repeated, "It's the economy, stupid!"

But by the year 2000 Americans seem to have forgotten those bad old times, and instead remember the economy as pretty good after all. On average in the 1992 polls, only 12% of Americans rated economic conditions in the country at that time as excellent or good, while 42% said poor—a net *negative* rating of 30 percentage points. However, right before the Republican Convention last August, Americans expressed much less dour views of the 1992 economy: 52% remembered it as excellent or good, and only 12% as poor—for a net *positive* rating of 40 points.

Although on Monday evening of the Democratic Convention a couple of weeks later President Clinton trumpeted the great economic progress that

had been made during his presidency, Gore mostly nullified that glowing look backward the following Thursday by stressing that he was not satisfied and would work to do better in the future. A post-Democratic Convention poll showed that voters' views had modified only slightly: now 44% rated the 1992 economy as excellent or good, while still just 12% said poor—for a net *positive* rating of 32 points.

This major reversal in the public's rating of the 1992 economy is reflected in the more positive approval rating that former President Bush now receives for his handling of the economy while he was in office. In 1992, Americans disapproved of the former president on this issue by an average margin of 75 to 21%—a net *negative* rating of 54 percentage points. But when asked seven years later, last June 1999, how Bush handled the economy while he was president, Americans approved by 58 to 36%, a net *positive* rating of 22 points.

Overall, the differences in ratings between 1992 and the present represent a 76-point reversal in President Bush's approval rating on his handling of the economy, and a 62 to 70-point reversal in the rating of the 1992 economy. This monumental change toward a more positive retrospective view of the economy may help to explain why

## “As Labor Day came and went, it became clear: this was a new presidential race.”

Gore does not appear to benefit from a thriving economy.

The most frequently offered commentary about the Democratic Convention is that Gore “solidified his base,” although typically the commentators do not specify what that “base” is supposed to be. One might assume from a political science perspective that Gore had shored up support among voters who identify themselves with the Democratic Party. If this were the case, then one might expect to see the major changes brought about by the Democratic Convention coming from Democrats, particularly the not so firmly committed Democrats who could be induced to cross party lines and support Bush.

An analysis of the polling results after the GOP Convention and then again after the Democratic Convention suggests a somewhat different dynamic.<sup>3</sup> Gore did, in fact, elicit increased support among Democrats and those leaning Democratic, but also among Re-

publicans (and, to a much smaller degree, among those leaning Republican). As shown in Table 1, Gore’s lead improved by more than eight percentage points among Republicans, and by about seven points each among Democrats and those leaning Democratic. Those leaning Republican and independents showed little change.

Note also that the *proportion* of Democrats in the likely electorate increased, and the proportion of Republicans decreased. This type of change might have occurred as relatively more Democrats expressed interest in the election (stimulated by news coverage of the Democratic Convention), thus indicating a greater likelihood of turnout and increasing the number of Democrats included in the likely voter model. It is also possible that with more positive coverage of the Democratic Party, even in the short run a few more voters were stimulated to identify with that party than would otherwise be the case. Probably both processes occurred.

The poll analysis shows that another important dynamic was also underway. Female voters, much more so than male voters, became more supportive of Gore after his party’s convention (see Figure 2). The polls after the Republican Convention showed Bush leading among both men and women—by 23 points among men (57 to 34%), and by 11 points among women (52 to 41%). These results represented a rather small gender gap, with five percentage points’ greater support for Bush among men and seven points’ greater support for Gore among women—an average of just six points.

After the Democratic Convention, the new polls showed that the gender gap had more than doubled, with increased support among women accounting for most of Gore’s “bounce” in support. Bush’s lead among men declined to 16 percentage points (54 to 38%), while Gore’s lead among women changed from minus 11 points to plus 16 points (54 to 38%)—the exact reverse of Bush’s lead among men. These results represented a net change for Gore among women of plus 27 points, compared with a seven-point gain among men. And the average gender gap was now 16 points, more than twice what it was before the Democratic Convention.

Table 1

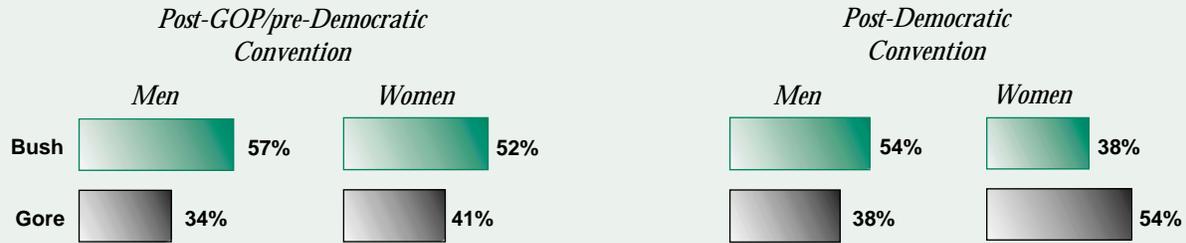
### Gore Improves His Lead in Both Parties

	<i>Proportion of electorate, pre-Democratic Convention</i>	<i>Proportion of electorate, post-Democratic Convention</i>	<i>Change in proportions</i>	<i>Gore lead, pre-Dem. Convention</i>	<i>Gore lead, post-Dem. Convention</i>	<i>Change in Gore lead</i>
Republican	39%	36%	-3%	-89%	-81%	+8%
Lean Republican	14	11	-3	-86	-84	+2
Independent	4	4	--	-16	-18	-2
Lean Democrat	9	11	+2	+71	+77	+6
Democrat	35	38	+3	+70	+77	+7

**Note:** Pre-Democratic Convention figures are based on Gallup polls conducted August 4-5 and 11-12. Post-Democratic Convention figures are based on polls conducted August 18-19 and 24-27.

Figure 2

## The Gender Gap Widens



**Note:** Pre-Democratic Convention figures are based on Gallup polls conducted August 4-5 and 11-12. Post-Democratic Convention figures are based on polls conducted August 18-19 and 24-27.

These results might suggest that the increased support among women came primarily among Democratic women, but again an analysis of the polling results shows a more complex dynamic. In fact, the movement toward Gore among women occurred across the political spectrum. Examining female voters, Gore's lead increased by 11 percentage points among Republicans, nine points among those leaning Republican, 15 points among independents, 11 points among those leaning Democratic and 13 points among Democrats. At the same time, Gore's lead among men increased by seven points among Republicans, but declined or remained about the same among the other party groups.

In his convention address, Gore stressed his desire to fight for working and middle class families, suggesting a kind of political class warfare for which he was criticized by his Republican opponent. To the extent that Gore was successful in portraying himself as the champion of lower and middle income families, one might expect his bounce from the convention to come disproportionately from women in those income groups. The data give only partial support to this hypothesis.

While Gore generally fares better among lower than higher income families, the bounce in support from the Democratic

Convention came about equally among middle and higher income women, while lower income women rallied the least. Following the convention, Gore's lead increased by 16 points among women in households earning less than \$20,000 a year, compared with 37 points among women with \$20,000 to 50,000 a year in household income, and 33 points among women with more than \$50,000 a year.

Another area where Gore's support might be explained is political ideology. As a "new Democrat," Gore reportedly designed his convention speech to appeal to the "moderates" in the Democratic Party and the general electorate, and to a lesser extent to the more active "liberal" base within his party. This focus suggests that Gore's greatest increase in support should have come mostly from moderates, followed by liberals and conservatives.

Polling results give only partial support to this hypothesis, as Gore's lead among moderates increased by 22 points after the convention, compared with an increase of 16 points among conservatives and seven points among liberals. Once again, the largest changes came from women: an increase in Gore's lead of 38 points among moderate women, 14 points among liberal women and 12 points among conservative women. Oddly, Gore's lead increased by 23

points among conservative men, but it increased just three points among moderate men, and it declined by five points among liberal men.

Overall, the results of this analysis suggest that Gore's candidacy became competitive not so much because the vice president solidified his party base, but because whatever happened during the convention elicited positive shifts in support among women across the political spectrum and also stimulated more Democrats to say they will vote in the election. How persistent these changes turn out to be could well determine the winner in November.

### Endnotes

<sup>1</sup>In January 2000, Gallup began basing its horse race figures on likely voters, which typically helps the Republican candidate in the polls, because Democrats are less likely to vote than are Republicans.

<sup>2</sup>By now, Gallup was asking the presidential preference question that included Bush, Gore, Nader and Buchanan. Bush's lead in the 4-way race was generally a point or so smaller than his lead in the 2-way race.

<sup>3</sup>This analysis is based on two polls conducted after the GOP Convention and before the Democratic Convention, August 4-5 and 11-12, and two polls after the Democratic Convention, August 18-19 and 24-27. Each poll surveyed about 1,000 adults nationwide, which included about 500 voters Gallup deemed most likely to vote in the election. The analysis here is based on the likely voters.