

Previewing the Final Presidential Debate

McCain will need to address economic concerns

by Frank Newport

PRINCETON, NJ -- The third and final presidential debate, to be held at Hofstra University on Wednesday night, will provide John McCain -- currently the underdog in the presidential race -- with perhaps his best remaining chance to shake up the race and achieve parity with his Democratic opponent.

A review of recent Gallup polling suggests that while Barack Obama leads McCain on the ballot and has clear strengths on key dimensions such as the economy, McCain himself is not without his own strengths, which he could in theory build on in the debate.

Here is a review of where the candidates stand on key personal dimensions and issues.

Image

Despite the fact that he's losing in the horse race overall, McCain's image is not substantially different from Obama's, with both men viewed favorably by a majority of Americans. Obama has a 62% to 35% favorable to unfavorable ratio, while McCain's is 56% to 41%.

Next, we'd like to get your overall opinion of some people in the news. As I read each name, please say if you have a favorable or unfavorable opinion of these people -- or if you have never heard of them. How about -- ?



USA Today/Gallup poll, Oct. 10-12, 2008

GALLUP POLL

These data suggest that in the debate Wednesday night, each man will in general start off with an overall positive image in the eyes of the average American.

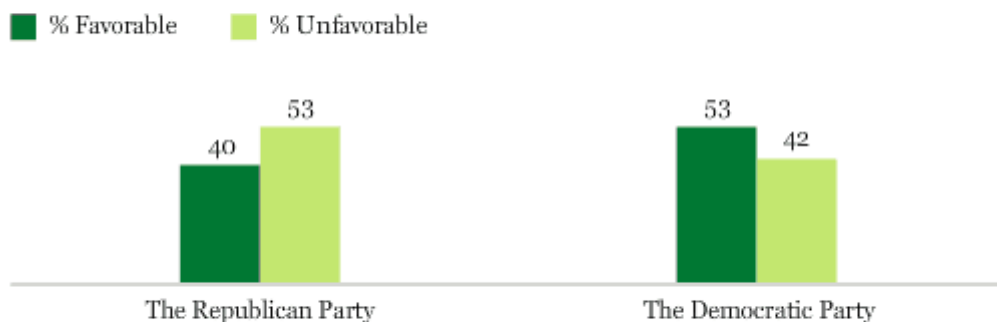
Despite some discussion that McCain's image may have suffered as a result of his recent negative attacks on his opponent, his unfavorables are only slightly higher now than in previous measures this year. McCain's image now is no worse than it was at the close of the Democratic National Convention (although it is not as positive as it was after the Republican convention).

It is possible that McCain will attempt to tarnish Obama's positive image in the debate Wednesday by continuing to refer to the latter's association with Bill Ayers, the former member of the Weathermen group, whom McCain and others have called a domestic terrorist. There is no clear indication from the data as to whether this could turn out to be an effective line of attack for McCain.

Party

Everything else being equal, McCain's Republican Party affiliation would appear to be a relative liability this year.

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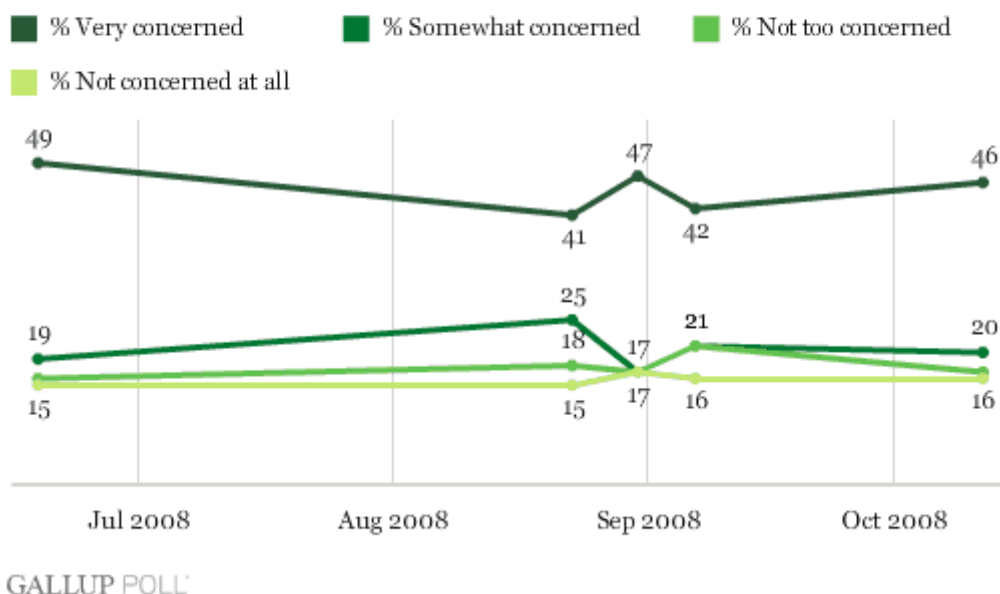
GALLUP POLL

Americans at this point view the Republican Party in a significantly more unfavorable than favorable light, while the opposite is true for the Democratic Party.

Both McCain and Obama have higher personal favorable ratings than the parties they represent. Still, each candidate would prefer to be representing a party in good standing with the voters. That's not the case for McCain this year.

McCain also has a distinct liability based on his political association with President George W. Bush. Bush has a 25% job approval rating at the moment, within 3 points of being the lowest presidential job approval rating in Gallup Poll history. Further, the latest *USA Today*/Gallup poll (conducted Oct. 10-12) shows that almost half of Americans are "very concerned" that as president, McCain would pursue policies that are too similar to those Bush has pursued.

How concerned are you that, as president, John McCain would pursue policies that are too similar to what George W. Bush has pursued -- very concerned, somewhat concerned, not too concerned, or not concerned at all?



Although McCain has attempted to distance himself from Bush in his campaigning this year, the public's concern that McCain is too close to Bush is no different now than it was when Gallup asked about it back in June.

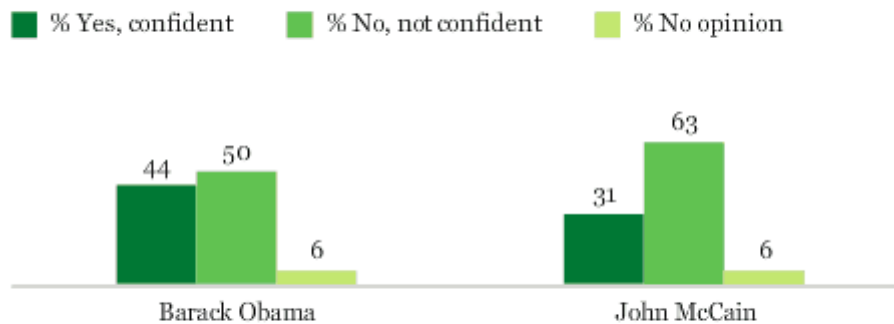
McCain may thus attempt to present himself as more of an independent ("maverick") candidate in the debate, and certainly to downplay his associations with his party and with President Bush.

Issues

There is good news and bad news for McCain in terms of Americans' views of his strengths compared to Obama's on the issues of the day. As Gallup Poll Senior Editor Lydia Saad recently reviewed, McCain has a significant disadvantage vis-à-vis Obama on the economy. This is the bad news for McCain, since the weekend poll shows two-thirds of Americans saying that stabilizing the economy should be the top priority for the new president when he takes office.

Furthermore, the recent poll shows that while 44% of Americans say Obama can fix the economy, only 31% say this about McCain.

If -- [RANDOM ORDER] -- is elected president, are you confident that he and his economic advisers can fix the economy, or not?



USA Today/Gallup poll, Oct. 10-12, 2008

GALLUP POLL

Neither of these numbers are rousing public endorsements of either candidate's ability to quickly remedy today's financial morass, but on a relative basis, Obama scores higher than McCain. Thus, a challenge for McCain is in some fashion to neutralize Obama's perceived strength on economic concerns, perhaps by introducing new economic plans and/or attempting to criticize Obama's economic proposals. The challenge for Obama is to avoid doing anything that would cause deterioration in his existing strong positioning on this critical issue.

McCain does retain strength over Obama in terms of his ability to handle terrorism (and, to a slight degree, Iraq). If McCain is somehow able to bring national security into the debate Wednesday, he may be able to score points.

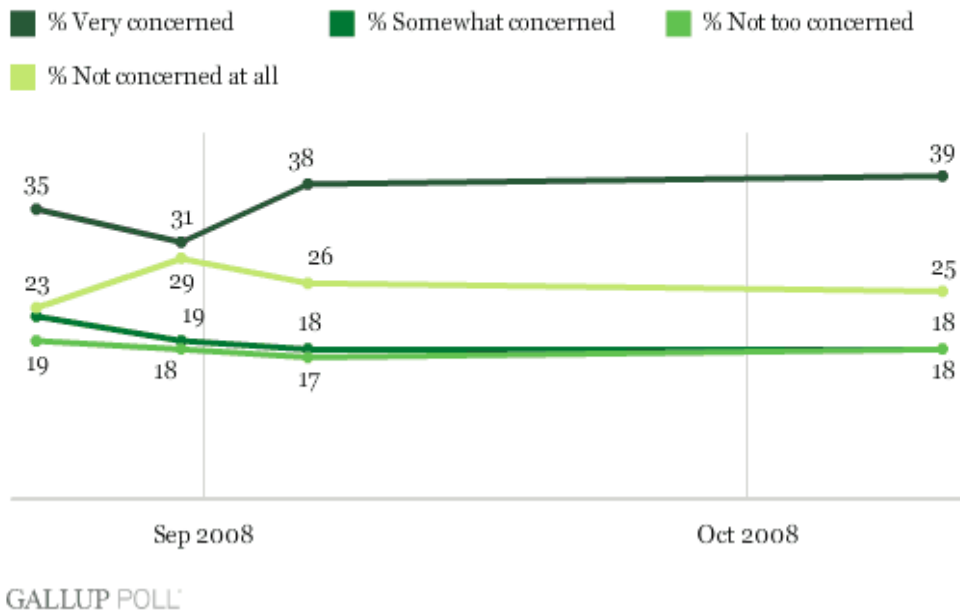
Personal Qualities

Obama leads McCain on the ballot, and leads him on three out of five personal qualities/dimensions tested in the recent poll ([as recently reviewed by Gallup Editor Jeff Jones](#)). Obama in particular is more likely than McCain to be seen as understanding the problems Americans face in their daily lives, and as having a clear plan for solving the country's problems. (The fact that only about half of Americans say McCain understands the average American's problems would appear to be a particular liability.)

But McCain is on parity with Obama on two other dimensions: being seen as able to manage the government effectively, and as being a strong and decisive leader. Thus, the debate could in theory provide an opportunity for McCain to position himself against Obama as the best leader/manager.

McCain's potential on this dimension relates to the finding in the weekend poll that about 4 out of 10 Americans are very concerned that Obama is not experienced enough to be an effective president, something that has not changed materially over the past several months.

How concerned are you that Barack Obama lacks the experience needed to be an effective president -- very concerned, somewhat concerned, not too concerned, or not concerned at all?



Bottom Line

Obama is clearly in the driver's seat going into Wednesday night's debate, leading in the overall horse-race preferences of voters, besting McCain on important issues relating to the economy, and dominating public perceptions of who is most empathetic to the concerns of the public and is ready with a plan to fix them.

McCain, on the other hand, is associated with an unpopular president and represents a political party that in this election is seen significantly less favorably than his opponent's party.

Nevertheless, McCain does have some strengths he could play off of in his attempt to shake up the race and reduce Obama's lead. McCain retains a strong positioning vis-à-vis Obama on terrorism and, to a lesser degree, Iraq, and is also just as likely as Obama to be seen as being a strong and decisive leader and a good manager. McCain's overall image is also positive, and just slightly less so than Obama's.

The focus of Wednesday's debate is on domestic issues, and Obama will no doubt attempt to avoid gaffes and focus on his empathetic understanding of Americans' economic woes and his plans to fix them. McCain can attempt to turn the focus to international concerns, and to play up his leadership qualities, but to really "win" the debate, the data would suggest that McCain needs to show concern for average Americans and come up with some way of convincing them that he has a plan to fix the economy.

Survey Methods

Results are based on telephone interviews with 1,269 national adults, aged 18 and older, conducted Oct. 10-12, 2008. For results based on the total sample of national adults, one can say with 95% confidence that the maximum margin of sampling error is ± 3 percentage points.

Interviews are conducted with respondents on land-line telephones (for respondents with a land-line telephone) and cellular phones (for respondents who are cell-phone only).

In addition to sampling error, question wording and practical difficulties in conducting surveys can introduce error or bias into the findings of public opinion polls.