

How Kerry could beat Bush

To close the sale with the public, the Democratic front-runner should can the populist rhetoric and talk to Americans about an "opportunity society."

By Ruy Teixeira

Let's face it: John Kerry isn't the Democrats' dream candidate. He's got a list of Senate votes and public statements as long as your arm (longer!) that the Republicans will use to typecast him as a stale, out-of-step Massachusetts liberal. And his campaigning style is, shall we say, not exactly electrifying.

But he is an improvement over Howard Dean in the electability department. And despite the problems mentioned above, he probably also has an electability advantage over John Edwards or Wes Clark (though this is less clear).

To radically simplify, a presidential candidate needs to impress voters in three ways: as a commander in chief and defender of national security; as a steward of the economy and a custodian of the domestic agenda; and as someone who can connect with voters as he campaigns for the nomination. In each of those areas, Kerry achieves threshold credibility—that is, he's good enough to make most voters give him a closer look without saying, "No way can I vote for that guy."

Instead, voters (at least our typical primary voters) might say: Kerry as commander in chief? He seems plausible. Kerry on domestic issues? Well, pretty good. He seems to know what he's talking about. Kerry as campaigner? Not exciting, sure, but at least he's disciplined and doesn't say a lot of goofy stuff.

There you have it. Threshold credibility! Contrast that with Dean, who seems implausible to many as a commander in chief and who, as a campaigner, has shown an inability to keep a lid on it when he really needs to. Or compare it with Clark, who seems very plausible indeed as a commander in chief but seems painfully thin in the domestic area, and who has shown himself not quite ready for prime time on the campaign trail. Or with Edwards, who is a great campaigner, with a pretty good to excellent domestic agenda, but who falls short in the commander in chief department.

Looked at this way, Kerry, with threshold credibility in all three areas, is logically the guy Democratic primary voters would turn to as they move from protest to who-can-beat-Bush politics.

It seems possible—even likely—that Kerry will be able to parlay this threshold credibility advantage into enough support to get the Democratic nomination. But will that be enough for him to win the general election? Almost certainly not.

Credibility in these departments merely means voters will give him a careful look. He'll still have to close the sale, and there are reasons to worry that Kerry has not yet found the themes and signature programs that will enable him to do so. Certainly his revival of warmed-over Gore-style populism does not augur well. Kerry has been putting this populism front and center in his recent campaign speeches, including his victory speech Tuesday night in New Hampshire:

"I have a message for the influence peddlers, for the polluters, the HMOs, the drug companies, big oil and all the special interests who now call the White House home: We're coming. You're going. And don't let the door hit you on the way out."

Now, there's a lot to be said for such a theme. As it was with Bill Clinton in 1992, it is probably an effective way to consolidate the support needed to get the nomination. And it can and should be an important part of the case to be made against George Bush in the general election campaign. Polls consistently show that Bush and his administration are viewed as being on the side of big corporations and the wealthy, not the average American. It would be political malpractice on Kerry's part not to emphasize this.

But that emphasis—especially “the people vs. the powerful” rhetoric —shows what you’re against more than what you want to do. (Kerry would do well to borrow some of Edwards’ more optimistic approach as well as Edwards’ whole frame that Bush’s tax and other policies are a radical shift toward rewarding wealth instead of work.) To succeed, Kerry needs to get beyond populist critique to a positive, compelling vision of where he wants to take the country. Here are some ideas.

Start with the economy. Criticizing its shortcomings is fine and, even with the pickup in growth, there’s still likely to be plenty to find fault with in 2004. In all likelihood, the Bush administration will wind up presiding over a net loss of jobs—particularly manufacturing jobs—which is quite extraordinary by historical standards (not since the disastrous administration of Herbert Hoover, to be precise). But compared with the situation that helped doom Bush’s father’s reelection chances, both the unemployment rate and the level of economic pessimism are likely to be lower than they were in 1992.

Therefore, even more than Bill Clinton’s campaign in 1992, Kerry’s campaign has to be about the future of the economy and the country in general—a future that Republican policies have seriously compromised. As pollster Stanley Greenberg argues in his new book, “The Two Americas,” the future that would resonate most with American voters is an opportunity society of the type envisioned by the Democrats of John F. Kennedy’s era. Such a society would give everyone access to the resources and education to get ahead and would be radically counterposed to where Bush is taking the country.

Take the Bush tax cuts. The public has never been particularly enthusiastic about them, seeing them as only modestly helpful, if at all, to the average person and the economy as a whole. They are well aware most of the benefits flow to the well-off and outright rich. Evidence is strong that they would prefer seeing the money that now subsidizes the affluent used for public purposes in specific areas instead.

One area that immediately presents itself, especially given its clear connection to an opportunity society, is education. The Republicans’ program in this area is simple: mandating high standards through the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act, while presiding over a stagnant federal education budget and dramatic education cutbacks in fiscally crunched states. That formula means states don’t have the money to help the many NCLB-designated failing schools, much less improve and modernize their school systems for the 21st century.

The public is well aware of this problem. Provided Kerry maintains the NCLB’s basic commitment to high standards and stringent accountability (“mend it, don’t end it”), he will find a receptive audience for proposals to give schools the resources they need to both meet current shortfalls and modernize for the future. Modernization could include universal access to preschool, keeping school buildings open all day and year-round for educational enrichment, and ensuring that all students can continue their education beyond high school. This, in turn, would mean substantial changes in the ways schools operate, recruit teachers and provide services. A modernization program on this scale will go far toward branding Kerry’s campaign as a campaign for the future.

The same focus on the future should inform his programs in other areas. In health-care, while he will have a fat target in the recently passed Medicare prescription-drugs bill, he should resist the temptation to focus on the notorious skimpiness of the drug benefit. The worst crime of the bill is it does nothing to rein in runaway drug costs, whose escalation terrifies the senior citizens who need prescription drugs. (Indeed, that’s the main reason the bill manages to spend a fair amount of money—originally estimated at \$400 billion over 10 years, and already that figure is being revised upward—yet achieve so little.) Similarly, the goal of extending coverage is a worthy one, but the typical voter already has health insurance and is most worried about the degrading quality and increasing costs (both premiums and out-of-pocket) of the policy they have. Modernizing the healthcare system in this country means, first and foremost, finding ways to keep

healthcare costs under control. That, in turn, would help lay the basis for a model of fiscally and politically sustainable universal coverage, instead of simply adding another expensive entitlement to the current system.

Or take Social Security. The Republican plan to partially privatize the system by “carving out” a portion of the FICA tax to be put into individual investment accounts is a bad one, and support for it is quite soft, once the inevitable reduction in guaranteed benefits is brought to voters’ attention. But a defense of the Social Security system, while reasonable in and of itself, does nothing to modernize a pension system that leaves some workers without retirement accounts at all and others with multiple and underfunded accounts.

The most straightforward way to do this is to set up a universal pension system that would provide every worker with a fully portable retirement account. Under such a system, all the various IRA and related accounts would be rolled into one tax-favored account and workers could direct cash from any and all of their 401(k) accounts into this universal account, which would remain with them as they moved from job to job. As former Clinton economic advisor Gene Sperling advocates, these accounts could be further supported by providing up to \$1,000 a year in matching contributions for savings deducted from paychecks—a one-to-one match for middle-income workers and a two-to-one match for lower-income workers.

Another issue Kerry should focus on is the environment and the need to safeguard it for future generations. This is an issue with strong appeal to key Democratic-leaning groups like professionals and the young. But it’s also an issue that gets a lot of moderate suburban swing voters hot under the collar. Polling consistently shows that voters think Bush has been doing a terrible job on the environment, trust the Democrats on the issue by wide margins, and vote heavily Democratic if it’s an important voting issue to them. The Gore campaign de-emphasized the issue in 2000, on the grounds that it wasn’t salient to enough voters. Kerry shouldn’t make the same mistake. The more he talks about it, the more salient the issue will become; the more salient it becomes, the better off his campaign will be.

Across all these issues, Kerry should highlight how his program for America’s future connects to a vision of an opportunity society where all Americans are provided with the tools they need to succeed, from adequate education to a reasonable level of health security to an effective way to save for their retirement.

How difficult would it be for Kerry to move in this direction? Not very. Many of his current programmatic proposals would fit right into the frame of an opportunity society—better, in fact, than they do into a simple populist frame, where they can more easily be typecast as just throwing more money at the middle class under the guise of “fairness.” For example, Kerry has some interesting ideas on education (including versions of universal preschool and access to college, and ways of fixing the NCLB) that tend not to receive much attention, but could be more energizing with an opportunity society approach. His proposals in other areas—with the exception of retirement, where he appears to lack any version of a universal pension system—are also consistent with the approach recommended here and would benefit from being reframed as providing more opportunity, rather than more fairness.

I can’t promise this approach will beat George Bush. But it’s got more potential to do so than “the people vs. the powerful.” Or (shudder) “the real deal.”