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Presidential candidates try to capture, understand the 'zeitgeist'

These past two weeks, we found ourselves in the throes of the Republican and Democratic conventions. It is in these highly scripted shows, these controlled extravaganzas, that each party gets its running start into the fall general election.

As I watched the speeches of each party's honor rollers, I was struck by how, so often, the speeches were interchangeable. Each side claimed to be the champions of lofty ideals like the "American Dream" and "freedom" and "backbone" and "creating jobs." Everyone it seemed paid homage to their father and to some terrible job he once did to support his family. And of course, moms were always honored: Nowhere is a mother more popular than on the floor of a national political convention.

So who will win in November? Of course, the party that captures the center. As this column has previously noted, the Republicans and the Democrats will, to be sure, obtain the votes of their party faithful. So the party that captures the political middle, those Americans who "vote the guy" each election, will prevail. As of the writing of this column, it's the neck and neck.

And who captures the center? The party that understands the nation's challenges and offers detailed solutions? Not so much. The winner will be the party that has its finger on the spirit of the time, the zeitgeist, and then offers a vision in tune with it. Understanding the zeitgeist is not just key; it is the key.

Consider in 2000, when George W. Bush presented a clear break from the tiresome foibles of Bill Clinton: "Our current president

embodied the potential of a generation," he declared. "So many talents. So much charm. Such great skill. But, in the end, to what end? So much promise, to no great purpose." Bush won.

Or in 2004, when the country was still reeling from the Sept. 11 attacks, the mailbox bomber, the D.C. snipers, and the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. Bush was again tuned into the zeitgeist: "I am running for president with a clear and positive plan to build a safer world and a more hopeful America," he declared. And so he won again.

Four years later, Barack Obama understood the time. The economy was a wreck and the country tired of war: "More of you have lost your homes and even more are watching your home values plummet. More of you have cars you can't afford to drive, credit card bills you can't afford to pay and tuition that's beyond your reach. These challenges are not all of government's making. But the failure to respond is a direct result of a broken politics in Washington and the failed policies of George W. Bush." Obama won.

What is the zeitgeist now? Which party correctly understands it and will thus capture the political center?

The Republicans at their convention last week have bet that the nation's focus is dissatisfaction with the economy and concern over its economic future, particularly our national debt. This is first and foremost evidenced by the nomination of Paul Ryan, noted Republican number cruncher as Mitt Romney's running mate. It is also evidenced by the Republican's prominent placement of Chris Christie, New Jersey's fire-brand governor, front and center

LAW & POLITICS



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for a talk about economics, particularly how he took on public sector unions and cut the budget in his home state.

In his acceptance speech, Romney hammered the economy: "In the richest country in the history of the world, this Obama economy has crushed the middle class. Family income has fallen by \$4,000, but health insurance premiums are higher, food prices are higher, utility bills are higher and the gasoline prices have doubled."

On the other side of the aisle, this week's convention shows that the Democrats have identified the zeitgeist as being comprised of

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two main points: first and foremost, social issues, and primarily with the present state of women's rights; and second, that the economy's dismal state is something inherited and on the mend.

The focus on women was evident on Wednesday, when the Democrats placed Sandra Fluke — the Georgetown law student at the center of a birth control kerfuffle with Rush Limbaugh — at the podium in prime time, along with senatorial candidate and attorney Elizabeth Warren.

The highlight of the Democrat convention was Bill Clinton's ex-coriolation of Republicans on Wednesday. Whether or not he had his facts right doesn't matter. He focused the discussion on, as he put it, "arithmetic."

As for Obama's speech — I'm not sure what it addressed. To be sure, it paled in comparison not only in content to that of Bill Clinton the night before, but in delivery as well. Obama's address was an amalgam of platitudes and might have worked if he were the challenger: "We believe in something called citizenship," he said.

But as the incumbent, Obama needed to have included some nuts and bolts about the economy.

Which party got it right? Who better understands the spirit of this particular time? I give the edge to the challenger. At the end of the day, the political center will vote their pocket books, the issue that trumps all others. There is real fear that the slow recovery may have seized up. This is the zeitgeist. The Republicans focused their convention on this concern.

Obama will do himself well to follow Clinton's lead and do the same. Because if he doesn't, we will soon enough be welcoming him back to Chicago.