

Moral Values Take Back Seat to Partisanship and the Economy In 2004 Presidential Election

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November 2004

The initial conclusion of media commentators that moral values determined the outcome of the 2004 presidential election was off the mark, neglecting the impacts of partisanship and the economy. The Republican Party made important strides in widening its coalition. On the other hand, early conclusions that the Democratic Party's coalition dooms it to defeat are premature; the Party continues to have solid bases of support that put it in a competitive position.

One of the most intriguing questions raised by the 2004 presidential election is whether or not moderates and independents continue to hold the balance of power. Bush has won the last two presidential campaigns without receiving majorities among what were once considered critical swing voters.

Bush Wins

President George W. Bush won by nearly 3.5 million popular votes over Senator John Kerry and held a comparable edge in Electoral College votes. The President drew 10 million more votes in 2004 than in 2000; Kerry received the votes of 6 million more Americans than Al Gore in 2000.

Presidential Candidate	Political Party	2004 Popular Vote		2004 Electoral Vote		2000 Popular Vote		2000 Electoral Vote	
George W. Bush	Republican	60,703,179	50.95%	286	53.16%	50,460,110	47.87%	271	50.37%
John Kerry	Democratic	57,303,128	48.09%	252	46.84%	--	--	--	--
Al Gore	Democratic	--	--	--	--	51,003,926	48.38%	266	49.44%
Ralph Nader	Independent	416,594	0.35%	0	0%	2,883,105	2.73%	0	0%
Michael Badnarik	Libertarian	389,933	0.33%	0	0%	--	--	--	--
Harry Browne	Libertarian	--	--	--	--	384,516	0.36%	0	0%
Patrick Buchanan	Reform	--	--	--	--	449,225	0.43%	0	0%
Other		338,055	0.28%	0	0%	236,376	0.22%	1	0.19%

Source: Dave Leip's Atlas of U.S. Presidential Elections




Third party candidates were not a factor. Ralph Nader’s support collapsed, falling from 2.73% in 2000 to only 0.35% in 2004, about the same level as the Libertarian candidate.

The critical question is why did President Bush win? Although exit polls were criticized, the problems were largely limited to early results (before the final data were included) that were prematurely leaked onto the Internet. The final exit polls closely mirrored the final vote totals and provide a valuable tool for interpreting the surveys.

The Moral of “Moral Values”

“Moral values” were heralded as the driving force in deciding the 2004 presidential elections in the media commentary on Election Night and the subsequent days. Indeed, “moral values” was singled out by a plurality of voters nationwide (22%) as the “most important issue” in the election, with 80% of these voters supporting Bush and only 18% backing Kerry.

Most Important Issue to American Voters

Most Important Issue			
	BUSH	KERRY	NADER
Total	2004	2000	2004
Moral Values (22%)	80%	n/a	18%
Economy/Jobs (20%)	18%	n/a	80%
Terrorism (19%)	86%	n/a	14%
Iraq (15%)	26%	n/a	73%
Health Care (8%)	23%	n/a	77%
Taxes (5%)	57%	n/a	43%
Education (4%)	26%	n/a	73%

Source: National Election Pool





The “moral values” interpretation of the 2004 elections suffers, however, from at least three central limitations.

First, the plurality of 22% that singled out “moral values” was nearly matched by a group of 3 additional issues, some of which were “80/20” issues for Kerry. Fully 20% of voters ranked the economy and jobs as the single most important issue in their decision and 80% supported Kerry; in addition, large numbers of voters singled out terrorism (19%) and Iraq (15%), with each set of voters breaking by lopsided margins for Bush and Kerry respectively. The bottom line, then, is that “moral values” was not the preeminent issue of the election, as initially claimed; it was one among four critical considerations.

The second limitation with the “moral values” interpretation is the assumption that it produced the President’s win; in fact, it may have appealed to the already converted. The exit poll from the Minnesota presidential election offers a telling puzzle. Minnesota voters, which sided with Kerry over Bush by 3.5 points, also ranked moral

values a bit higher (24%). (Iraq was also ranked higher at 20%.) Moral values in and of itself did not deliver the election to the President.

Most Important Issue to Minnesota Voters

Most Important Issue				
	2004	2000	2004	2004
Total	2004	2000	2004	2004
Moral Values (24%)	77%	n/a	21%	1%
Iraq (20%)	19%	n/a	80%	0%
Terrorism (18%)	87%	n/a	13%	*
Economy/Jobs (18%)	15%	n/a	84%	1%
Taxes (5%)	61%	n/a	38%	*
Education (5%)	22%	n/a	78%	*
Health Care (5%)	9%	n/a	89%	1%

Source: National Election Pool

Kerry Wins Minnesota

Presidential Candidate	Political Party	Popular Vote	
John Kerry	Democratic-Farmer Labor	1,445,014	51.09%
George W. Bush	Republican	1,346,695	47.61%
Ralph Nader	Better Life	18,613	0.66%
Other	--	18,348	0.65%




Source: Minnesota Secretary of State

Third, the meaning of “moral values” and the impact of specific social issues are far from clear; voters who already support Bush may mention it as a generalized justification for supporting him, a far cry from the specific intent that some commentators and policy makers have read into it.

Abortion and gay marriage were the specific issues related to moral values that received the most discussion during the campaign. Yet, the public remains ambivalent or opposed to strict conservative positions on these issues.

Fifty-five percent of voters agree that abortion should be always or mostly legal. By contrast, 42% favor making it always or mostly illegal. Not surprisingly, the opponents of abortion voted overwhelmingly for Bush while its supporters tended to vote for Kerry.



Voters Support Some Legal Protections for Abortion

Abortion should be ...	 BUSH	 KERRY	 NADER
	2004	2000	2004
Total			
Always Legal (21%)	25%	+0	73%
Mostly Legal (34%)	38%	+0	61%
Mostly Illegal (26%)	73%	+4	26%
Always Illegal (16%)	77%	+3	22%

Source: National Election Pool

On same-sex couples, a majority favors some kind of legal status whether it is in the form of civil unions (35%) or legal marriage (25%). By comparison, 37% believe that no legal recognition should be given to same-sex couples.

Voters Accept Some Kind of Legal Status for Same-Sex Couples

Policy Toward Same Sex Couples	 BUSH	 KERRY	 NADER
	2004	2000	2004
Total			
Legally Marry (25%)	22%	n/a	77%
Civil Unions (35%)	52%	n/a	47%
No Legal Recognition (37%)	70%	n/a	29%

Source: National Election Pool

Don't Forget About the Economy and Partisanship




The preoccupation with moral values and then the postmortems on John Kerry's strategy and personal limitations as a candidate has distracted attention from the two most important and enduring influences on voting – the economy and partisanship.

No Significant Economic Backlash Against Bush: Although Kerry staked his campaign on dissatisfaction with domestic conditions, the reality is that macro-economic conditions were moderately strong compared to past elections.

Presidential candidates who run for reelection or represent the incumbent party have generally won when the gross domestic product (GDP) rises by 2.6% or more in the second quarter. The GDP rose by 3.3% in the second quarter of 2004 (3.7% in the third quarter). This and other types of macro-economic indicators led five of six leading social scientists to accurately predict (before the general election campaign began) that Bush would win a majority of the popular vote (*PS: Political Science and Politics*, October 2004 issue).

Indeed, there was not an outpouring of voters who felt economic despair and a general sense that the country was off course.

In terms of their own pocketbook, more voters reported that their family’s financial situation was “better” (32%) than “worse” (28%).

Family’s Financial Situation			
	BUSH	KERRY	NADER
Total	2004	2000	2004
Better (32%)	80%	+44	19%
Worse (28%)	20%	-43	79%
Same (39%)	49%	-11	50%




Source: National Election Pool

Voters were split over whether the overall national economy was excellent or good as opposed to not good or poor.

National Economy			
	BUSH	KERRY	NADER
Total	2004	2000	2004
Excellent or Good (47%)	87%	n/a	13%
Not Good or Poor (52%)	20%	n/a	79%

Source: National Election Pool

Although the Kerry campaign counted on benefiting from a backlash fuelled by a sense that the country was off course, voters were split over whether the country was heading in the right direction.

Is U.S. Going in Right Direction?			
	BUSH	KERRY	NADER
Total	2004	2000	2004
Yes (49%)	89%	+53	10%
No (46%)	12%	-62	86%



Source: National Election Pool

Overall, then, Kerry did not benefit from deep discontent over the economy and the country’s overall conditions. The kind of backlash against Jimmy Carter in 1980 for rising inflation, high gas prices, and a general malaise about the direction of the country did not develop in 2004.

Partisans Circled the Wagons: Political parties have long been the single most important influence on the vote choices of Americans. In 2004, voters were evenly split between the two major parties (37% each), with about 9 out of 10 voters staying loyal to their party’s candidate. Although Democrats during the fall were fond of mentioning Republican friends who planned to vote for Kerry, 93% of Republicans supported Bush. Democrats were also quite loyal to Kerry, with 89% voting for him. Voters who were

independent of either major party (26% of the electorate) favored Kerry to Bush by one point (49% to 48%), though the difference was within the margin of error.

Strong Loyalty of Democrats and Republicans for their Party's Candidate

Vote By Party ID			
	BUSH	KERRY	NADER
Total	2004	2000	2004
Democrat (37%)	11%	+0	89%
Republican (37%)	93%	+2	6%
Independent (26%)	48%	+1	49%

Source: National Election Pool

Although Democrats and Republicans faced potential third party threats, Nader and Libertarian Michael Badnarik were non-factors in 2004. Indeed, voter support for third party candidates fell to its lowest level since 1988.

Disappearing Support for Third Party Candidates

	1996	2000	2004
Ralph Nader	0.71%	2.74%	0.35%
Libertarian Candidates	0.50%	0.36%	0.33%




Source: Dave Leip's Atlas of U.S. Presidential Elections.

Republican Coalition Widens Base

President Bush expanded his coalition of supporters.

Religious Voters are A Solid Base for the Republican Party: He continued to win overwhelming backing from white evangelicals and born again Christians who made up 23% of the electorate.




White Evangelical / Born-Again?

	 BUSH	 KERRY	 NADER
	2004	2000	2004
Total			
Yes (23%)	78%	n/a	21%
No (77%)	43%	n/a	56%

Source: National Election Pool

Bush also won lopsided majorities among the religiously most active – those who attend church at least weekly (41% of voters).

Vote By Church Attendance


	 BUSH	 KERRY	 NADER
	2004	2000	2004
Total			
Weekly (41%)	61%	n/a	39%
Occasionally (40%)	47%	n/a	53%
Never (14%)	36%	n/a	62%

Source: National Election Pool

Increased Support amongst Racial and Ethnic Minorities: Given the changing composition of the American electorate, one of the President's most important steps was to expand the Republican Party's ethnic and racial bases of support. In particular, Bush narrowed the traditional double-digit advantage of Democrats among Latino voters to nine points as well as narrowing the gap among Asian voters. Although Kerry continued to outpoll Bush among racial and ethnic minorities, the inroads by President Bush could augur an important transition.

Increased Support for Bush Amongst Racial and Ethnic Minorities




Vote By Race

	 BUSH	 KERRY	 NADER
	2004	2000	2004
Total			
White (77%)	58%	+4	41%
African-American (11%)	11%	+2	88%
Latino (8%)	44%	+9	53%
Asian (2%)	44%	+3	56%
Other (2%)	40%	+1	54%

Source: National Election Pool

Narrowing Gender Gap: For the first time in a number of presidential elections, the Democratic candidate failed to win at least a double-digit edge among women voters. In addition to narrowing the Democrat's advantage among women, Bush increased his lead among men to 11 points.

Bush Neutralized the Gender Gap

Vote By Gender	 BUSH	 KERRY	 NADER
Total	2004	2000	2004
Male (46%)	55%	+2	44%
Female (54%)	48%	+5	51%

Source: National Election Pool



Democratic Coalition is Not as Weak as Assumed

Kerry's concession speech ignited a spate of hand wringing within the Democratic Party and a sense that it was necessary to reinvent the Party to have a chance at winning the presidency in the future. The starting point for Democrats is to appreciate that the economy was not nearly as bad as Kerry's team assumed; terrorism, the continuing political aftershocks following 9/11, and the loyal backing of Republican are also factors that favored Bush.

There are five factors that may well work to the advantage of Democrats in the future. **First, the Party's base is remarkably unified**, as we saw above.

Second, the late-breaking undecided vote (11% of the electorate) broke for Kerry. In future elections, Democrats can most likely count on a favorable split at the end of the campaign.

Kerry Won Narrow Majority of Late Deciding Voters




When Did You Decide Who To Vote For?	 BUSH	 KERRY	 NADER
Total	2004	2000	2004
Within the Last Week (11%)	46%	n/a	52%
Earlier Than That (89%)	52%	n/a	47%

Source: National Election Pool

Third, the policy issues that may well dominate the next congressional or presidential elections appear to be trending in the direction of the Democrats. Backing for the war in Iraq has significantly eroded; national polls show that the public's belief that the U.S. made the right decision in using military force declining from 74% in

March 2003 to 46% in October 2004. The exit polls of the 2004 elections indicate that a narrow majority of voters in 2004 approved of the decision to go to war (51% to 45%), with supporters overwhelmingly favoring Bush and opponents backing Kerry by an equally lopsided margin.



Voters Split on War in Iraq

Decision To Go To War In Iraq	 BUSH	 KERRY	 NADER
	2004	2000	2004
Total	85%	n/a	14%
Approve (51%)	12%	n/a	87%
Disapprove (45%)			0%

Source: National Election Pool

In addition, growing difficulties in gaining access to medical care and affording its price is an evolving issue that works to the advantage of the Democrats. Overall, health care was in a second tier of important issues (8% ranked it as the most important issue in the 2004 elections) but 70% are very concerned by its availability and cost, with Kerry holding a significant advantage among these voters.

Health Care Remains Pressing Concern of Voters, Breaking for Kerry




Availability And Cost Of Health Care	 BUSH	 KERRY	 NADER
	2004	2000	2004
Total	41%	n/a	58%
Very Concerned (70%)	71%	n/a	28%
Somewhat Concerned (23%)	84%	n/a	15%
Not Very Concerned (5%)	83%	n/a	15%
Not at All Concerned (2%)			2%

Source: National Election Pool

Fourth, Democrats continue to draw much of their support from moderate and low income Americans. Kerry held an 11-point lead among voters who earned less than \$50,000 per year (55% to 44%). One of the challenges for Democrats, however, is the skew in voter turnout: 45% of voters making less than \$50,000 cast a ballot even though 58% of households and 81% of individuals fall into this group. (Research on the stratification in turnout can be found in the American Political Science Association Task Force on “Inequality and American Democracy,” www.apsanet.org/inequality.)

Kerry Wins Support of Low and Moderate Income Voters; Higher Income Voters Support Bush

Vote By Income

	 BUSH	 KERRY	 NADER
TOTAL (% voting) [U.S. Census: Household, 1999; Individual, 2003]	2004	2000	2004
Less Than \$50,000 (45%) [Household, 58%; Individual, 81%]	44%	n/a	55%
\$50,000 or More (55%) Household, 42%; Individual, 19%]	56%	n/a	43%




Source: National Election Pool; U.S. Census Bureau, “Current Population Survey, 2004” and “Household Income, 1999.”

Fifth, moderate and independent voters are breaking for the Democrats. Karl Rove’s strategy of relying on exceptional loyalty and turnout by the Republican Party’s base has succeeded in electing Bush twice. The question is whether the Republican Party can consistently win by breaking even or losing centrist voters – that is, voters who are ideologically moderate and independent of either major party.

Among the 45% of voters who describe their ideology as moderate, Kerry held a 9 point edge (54% to 45%). Not surprisingly, Conservatives overwhelming sided with Bush and Liberals supported Kerry.

Moderates Break for Kerry

Vote By Ideology




	 BUSH	 KERRY	 NADER
Total	2004	2000	2004
Liberal (21%)	13%	+0	85%
Moderate (45%)	45%	+1	54%
Conservative (34%)	84%	+3	15%

Source: National Election Pool

Nationally, Kerry held one point edge among independent voters and a significant lead in critical swing states. In Florida, Kerry enjoyed a 16-point edge among the 23% of voters who described themselves as independent.

Kerry Opened Large Lead among Independent Voters in Florida

Vote By Party ID


	 BUSH	 KERRY	 NADER
Total	2004	2000	2004
Democrat (37%)	14%	+1	85%
Republican (41%)	93%	+2	7%
Independent (23%)	41%	-5	57%

Source: National Election Pool

In Ohio, Kerry enjoyed a 19-point lead among the 25% of voters who described themselves as independent.

Kerry Opened Large Lead among Independent Voters in Ohio

Vote By Party ID

	 BUSH	 KERRY
Total	2004	2000
Democrat (35%)	9%	+0
Republican (40%)	94%	+5
Independent (25%)	40%	-14

Source: National Election Pool