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475 Riverside Drive · Suite 1274 · New York, New York 10115-1274
(212) 870-2500 · FAX: (212) 870-2202 · aps@psqonline.org · <http://www.psqonline.org>

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Book Reviews

America's Choice 2000: Entering a New Millenium edited by William Crotty. Boulder, CO, Westview Press, 2001. 213 pp. Paper, \$22.00.

The Perfect Tie: The True Story of the 2000 Presidential Election by James W. Ceaser and Andrew E. Busch. Lanham, MD, Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc. 2001. 256 pp. Paper, \$15.95.

Books about the 2000 presidential election have suffered a cruel fate: the terrorist attacks of September 11 are a terrible swift yardstick against which to measure predictions about the Bush presidency. The cruelty lies partly in the unfairness of expecting any author to have imagined such an astonishing turn of events. But it lies equally in the finality of those events; the consequences for the presidency along with everything else are impossible to ignore or explain away. How do these books measure up? More specifically, would their analysis of the election give us any reason to predict that President George W. Bush could respond effectively, less than a year later, to a crisis far worse than disputed ballots? On these grounds especially, *The Perfect Tie* by James W. Ceaser and Andrew E. Busch is superior to *America's Choice 2000*, a collection of essays assembled by William Crotty.

The title of *The Perfect Tie* is a play on “the perfect storm”—an overlapping of natural events whose combined force was much greater than the sum of the parts. The events in question—changes in party allegiance, ideological shifts, culture wars, demographic changes, among others—all worked to create a nearly perfect balance of political forces in 2000, not only in the closest presidential election in history, but in House, Senate, and state legislative races as well. The result is an election that delivered “no popular mandate of any kind. George W. Bush received nothing more than a key to his office” (p. 20). But Ceaser and Busch shrewdly note that the lack of a mandate “offers some new possibilities for governance,” depending on the “techniques and tone” adopted by the President as he settles into his role (p. 21). This sense of the presidency as an office unfettered by mandates points to a truer constitutional understanding of the president’s role as leader rather than servant. It is a conception vindicated by subsequent events: a president without a mandate but with strong partisan backing and an abundance of patience may be well placed to make the most of what fortune throws his way.

The most important themes and conclusions of *The Perfect Tie* can only be briefly summarized here, but it is a book rich in analysis and detail, well-written, and laced with a sometimes impish humor. (See the “mathematical model for post-election campaigns” on p. 176.)

- Retrospective voting models took a serious beating. Al Gore’s own mistakes and the long shadow cast by the moral failings of his patron overcame the general sense that the country was on the right economic track.
- This election was an “election of bases” (p. 166)—both Gore and Bush were more popular with strong partisans and had less cross-party appeal than any candidates in recent memory. The close balance between Democrats and Republicans meant it was the swing voters’ election to decide; the difficulty they faced in doing so is one reason why the game went into extra innings.
- The most interesting part of the campaign was the three-way race for the loyalty of those independent voters attracted to the idea of reform—a cross-party contest between John McCain and Bill Bradley. McCain’s victory over Bradley in open primaries as well as in the opinion polls meant that Bush would have competition only on his left, and Gore would have no competition at all.
- The rules governing primary elections continue to skew presidential elections in unhappy ways. Ceaser and Busch note three problems, which appear to be semi-permanent: the extreme front-loading of the primary season; the large number of open and blanket primaries; and the absurdly long “interregnum” between the effective end of the primary season and the party conventions, when the “real” campaign is supposed to begin. This long hiatus, they conclude, gave Gore a chance to “reinvent” himself one time too many, but played to one of Bush’s strengths, which was his patience.

In some ways, however, the finest hour for Ceaser and Busch comes in their analysis of the long postelection crisis. Their summary is much more comprehensive than the shorter version found in William Crotty’s chapter (“Elections by Judicial Fiat: The Courts Decide”); and it is far more judicious than either Crotty’s chapter or the contribution by John Kenneth White. Disgruntled Democrats will want to confront the careful case that Ceaser and Busch make for the justice of the final outcome—especially their discussion of the competing interventions of the Florida and the United States Supreme Courts (pp. 171–212).

The authors of *The Perfect Tie* are thus not persuaded that the Bush presidency has begun under a cloud of public suspicion. After all, winning the electoral college while losing the popular vote is a legitimate way to win the presidency. Far more dangerous, in their view, would have been an effort to recount every vote in Florida in the absence of objective standards for determining voter intent.

By contrast, Crotty concludes that “through it all, a sense of the political fragility and vulnerability of the most fundamental of institutions in the world’s oldest democracy emerged from the conflict” (p. 37). Yet in light of the government’s response to the attacks in September, this judgment now seems overly dramatic, even hysterical. Equally doubtful is White’s conclusion in his chapter that “although Bush is the duly-elected president in the eyes of the law and the Constitution, his ability to govern is likely to be severely impaired by the refusal of so many Americans to confirm him as president in their hearts” (p. 183). Either the election did not seem so outrageous to so many people after all, or the public’s faith in the basic fairness of the system and the normality of court interventions is stronger than it appeared in December. What is undeniable is that the voices in both camps urging caution and restraint saved the country from a catastrophe whose full dimensions September 11 has made frighteningly clear.

DENNIS HALE
Boston College

Presidential Mandates: How Elections Shape the National Agenda by Patricia Heidotting Conley. Chicago, *The University of Chicago Press*, 2001. 239 pp. Paper, \$17.50.

For years I have taught the common wisdom about “mandate uncertainty” in presidential elections. Because newly elected presidents cannot discern from the returns alone which of many possible factors is responsible for their victory—their stand on any one of many issues, the mediocre performance of their predecessor, their reputation for unimpeachable integrity, their opponent’s lackluster campaign, and so on—they have considerable latitude in claiming a mandate for proposed policy departures.

Patricia Conley’s cogent book forces us to rethink the received wisdom on the important subject of the relationship between presidential elections and policy change. Using several approaches, she argues that newly elected presidents do not have considerable latitude in claiming a mandate. Instead, their options are constrained. The likelihood that a newly elected president will claim a mandate will depend more on the extensiveness of his ambitions for a policy innovation, the decisiveness of his electoral victory, and the partisan and ideological composition of Congress than on his personality or political skills. In short, structural regularities come to the fore and individual characteristics of presidents recede in the explanation of variations in mandate claiming by new presidents.

A real strength of Conley’s analysis is her use of multiple approaches. She begins by putting her logic in the form of a formal model, complete with the math. Then, she uses multivariate analysis and data about presidential elections