



Why Did Kerry Lose? Answer: It Wasn't "Values"

By James Q. Wilson

Post-election analysis has focused on the importance of "moral values" in the presidential campaign, yet a closer examination of the numbers reveals that a variety of issues and the success of organizational strategies in both parties played a bigger role in the outcome.

It is easy to explain the election. Too easy. Depending on your instincts and how much time you are given to think, you can say that the electorate has moved to the right or that John Kerry flip-flopped or that the Democrats were unable to appeal to the moral values of people. Thomas Friedman wrote in the *New York Times* that President Bush was reelected by people who disagree with Friedman on what America should be. His evidence is that "Christian fundamentalists" have used their "religious energy to promote divisions and intolerance at home and abroad." Garry Wills has said much the same thing.

These explanations are wide of the mark. The nation did not undergo a rightward shift in 2004 any more than it had when it elected Reagan in 1980 and reelected him in 1984. The policy preferences of Americans are remarkably stable, a fact that has been confirmed by virtually every scholar who has looked at the matter.

There is no doubt that John Kerry showed great skill at embracing deeply contradictory positions, but that does not make him unusual; all politicians have mastered the art of self-contradiction. What was remarkable in this election is that one candidate, President Bush, never changed: he said what he meant and meant what he said.

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A True Moral-Values Majority?

If the Democrats could not appeal to the moral values of people, that fact must have been lost on the 48 percent of the voters who supported Senator Kerry. It is true that moral values were important to some: based on exit polls, to about one-fifth of all voters. And of these, the overwhelming majority supported President Bush. But almost exactly the same fraction said that jobs and the economy were the most important issues, and of these the overwhelming majority supported Senator Kerry. And if you add together terrorism and the war in Iraq, 34 percent found these to be the most important issues. (Mr. Bush carried those worried about terrorism, Senator Kerry those critical of the Iraq war.) Given these facts, why does a *Times* reporter write that moral values were the "defining issue"? I have read her essay three times and cannot discover an answer.

I am just as mystified by Mr. Friedman's lament that "Christian fundamentalists" are ruining his America by fostering "divisions and intolerance." It would make as much sense to say that liberals are fostering division and intolerance by favoring abortion and gay marriages. In fact, abortion was not an issue in the election, and Messrs. Bush and Kerry both opposed gay marriage. A ban on gay marriage was approved in Oregon, a state won by Senator Kerry.

In truth, American politics has frequently been gripped by moral issues. It is one of the aspects of our history and culture that makes us different from most European democracies. We have become morally engaged by the struggle against slavery and against liquor and for civil rights. David L. Chappell, in his splendid history of the civil rights movement, reminds us that this was not simply or even mostly a political struggle about well-understood rights but rather a religious effort to define those rights and to motivate people to recognize them. It is easy to forget that there were religious leaders on both sides of that struggle. Those who defended segregation urged followers to confine preaching to the word of God and not to meddle with cultural matters; those who attacked segregation said that the word of God required them to prevail by changing the culture.

It is true that President Bush improved his voting support among people who attend church frequently and who describe themselves as Catholics, Protestants, and Jews, but Senator Kerry won nearly half of all Catholic votes and over three-fourths of all Jewish ones.

The ritualistic condemnation of Christian fundamentalists neglects two things: First, secularists are just as likely to provoke moral outrage as are religious believers, yet we rarely read stories about the secular Left. Second, research shows that organizations of Christian fundamentalists are hardly made up of fire-breathers but rather are organizations whose members practice consensual politics and rely on appeals to widely shared constitutional principles.

Reconsidering the Polls

One can make a good case that the economy or the war in Iraq was just as important as morality. Of the people who thought tax cuts were good for the economy, 93 percent supported President Bush; of those who thought they were bad for the economy, 92 percent supported Senator Kerry. About half the people thought the Iraq war had made this nation more secure; 89 percent of them supported President Bush. For the half that thought the war had made this country less secure, 80 percent voted for Senator Kerry.

People vote for the president for a host of reasons that pollsters have difficulty in grasping. All we seem to

know very clearly is where they live. The red (Bush) counties are found not only in the South and the Midwest but in the interior of California, Oregon, and Washington, and in upstate New York and eastern Pennsylvania. The blue (Kerry) counties are largely the sites of big cities. Texas may be Bush country, but its far southern counties went for Kerry. To explain the vote requires us to explain the variety of factors that characterize the voting preferences of the great heterogeneous mass of people one finds on farms or in cities. No political scientist has done this, and I doubt that many journalists will do it either. I have attended lots of scholarly meetings where professors try to predict election outcomes with, at best, moderate success. One problem is that they have only some very gross measures on which to work, such as the state of the economy and standings in the polls.

The pollsters do not provide much information because they usually gather too few responses to permit observers to cross-tabulate data into all of the relevant categories. What is the vote likely to be in Ohio among gun-owning union members who attend church but who have just lost their jobs and think the United States should spend less time fighting wars? Or how will business people vote if they have received a tax cut, think our invasion of Iraq is not going well, and oppose abortion?

I draw lessons from the election, but not very deep ones. One is that the profound liberal bias among many big-city newspapers and most television stations did not determine the outcome. Evan Thomas was wrong when he said that the Left media would add fifteen points to the Democrats' total but may have been right when he later scaled down his projection to five points.

What is most impressive about this election has been the extraordinary success both parties have had in registering new voters and getting them to the polls. Suppose the Democrats had done this better than the GOP. The result might well have been a Bush loss in Florida and Ohio, and thus the loss of the election. Our press would now be running columns about the liberal shift in public opinion, the defeat of fundamentalists, and the importance of anti-war sentiments. But in fact the Democrats did not do a better job than the Republicans. Perhaps the columnists should now just say that Karl Rove out-organized his opponents.