

Making Sense of the Election and a Plan for What Lies Ahead

“Now What?” *Senator-elect Jim McKay (Robert Redford) asks his campaign consultant (Peter Boyle) in the last scene of The Candidate. Redford’s bewilderment resulted from learning he had just won, but his expression sums up the feelings of progressives on the morning of November 3, 2004. Here is an attempt to answer Redford’s question.*

I. The election

A. The electorate – where did voters shift?

What really happened on November second? What meaning does it hold for the political future?

Some context – putting the election in perspective.

Here are some starting points:

- Despite the mass of red that filled television screens on election night, the 51%-48% Presidential vote means the country is fairly evenly divided. Putting the Kerry vote in perspective, it is the same percentage Al Gore received in 2000 and higher than Clinton’s in 1992. The country can more accurately be described as a purple-like mix of red and blue. In 21 of the 50 states the winning candidate received less than 55% of the vote.
- Acknowledging the nation is divided does not take away from the fact that this election continues a gradual 20-year drift of increasing identification with the Republican Party. The proportion of voters identifying themselves as Republican increased while the proportion identifying as Democrats declined.

- Culturally, this was a year when Catholic clergy became more involved in politics than ever before to energize conservatives who had been unreliable voters, many of whom were older. But the message they were preaching – morality – did not play to all Catholics. Moral issues ranked third, behind terrorism and jobs, as the reason Catholics chose one candidate over another.
- It was a year in which record numbers of young adults registered and voted, but their increased participation and the influx of new voters by Democrats was matched by Republican efforts to energize conservative unreliable voters. Democrats went into Election Day confident that they had registered so many more Ds than Rs they would have an edge. This was a reasonable assumption, but the Republicans were targeting conservatives who have been registered but saw no reason to vote before.

A closer look at who shifted and where.

Democrats lost ground among four key groups:

Four groups in America voted in significantly smaller numbers for the Democratic candidate for president in 2004 compared to 2000: women, older Americans, Catholics, and Hispanics.

- Women
The Democrat, John Kerry, won 51% of the women's vote and obtained 44% of the men's vote – a gender gap of seven points. This compares to a 12-point gender gap for Democrat Al Gore in 2000 (54% women-42% men). A smaller gap would be okay if it was caused by the Democrat gaining among both men and women, with men gaining faster. But Kerry's vote among men did not make up for his loss among women. Kerry's largest loss happened among married women (44% Kerry and 55% Bush, compared to 48% Gore and 49% Bush) regardless of whether or not they had children. It turns out to be a "Mrs. Vote," not a "moms' vote" that mattered.
- Older voters
For every two young people motivated to go to the polls to vote against George Bush there were three older voters who went to the polls and did the opposite. Among 18-29 year olds, Kerry won 54% to 45% (plus nine for Kerry, compared to Gore's plus seven with this age group). Young voters turned out in record numbers, but so did other age groups. Thus, the proportion of youth vote stayed at 17% of the electorate – the same as 2000.

Kerry lost older Americans to Bush by eight points – 46% for Kerry and 54% Bush. Gore won this age group by four points in 2000. This became very significant, given that voters over 60 increased their proportion of the overall vote from 22% in 2000 to 24% this year. Since 1992, Democrats have won the senior vote. Kerry's loss returns Democrats to pre-Clinton days when Republicans spoke more convincingly to older voters.

- Catholics
Kerry lost Catholics by five points (47% Kerry to 52% Bush), compared to Gore winning Catholics by two points. Catholics are 27% of the electorate and whoever wins them usually wins the White House.
- Hispanics
While the Hispanic vote doubled from four to eight percent of the electorate, Kerry received the lowest showing for a Democratic candidate in over 30 years. Kerry received 53% of the Hispanic vote to Bush's 44%.

A take-away point on the electorate:

This election was not like 1980 when we had the emergence of Reagan Democrats. This year you must look hard to find Bush Democrats. The parties are more polarized.

The Democratic candidate improved his vote among four other groups: Democrats, independents, liberals and moderates. But these advantages did not offer much help because the proportion of the electorate describing themselves as Democrats or moderates declined since 2000, and the share of Republicans and conservatives increased.

Democrats and Republicans each made up 37% of the vote. Kerry received 89% of his party's vote and George Bush pulled in 90% of his party. Among the 26% of the electorate calling itself independent, it was Kerry 49% and Bush 48%.

While the proportion of self-described liberals stayed constant (21% in 2004, 20 in 2000), moderates declined five points (from 50% to 45%) and conservatives gained five (from 29% to 34%). Kerry carried moderates 54% to 45% but he needed more than that margin considering he would lose conservatives 15% to 84%.

B. The issues, the candidates, and the parties – what role did they play?

The issues

Over the last two years, President Bush has not had the issues on his side, yet he has managed to appeal to many – not all – voters by keeping the focus on fighting terrorism and wrapping the warm arms of religion around cold public policies.

Americans do not agree with the President's policies, but absent a strong, clear, unequivocal choice from the Democratic Party's candidates, the public gives him a pass on those areas where they disagree.

Before Democrats debate the necessity of changing their policy positions to move closer to those of the Republicans, consider the following:

- Majorities of Americans say the tax cut went too far, and they would have chosen to reduce the national debt and fund Social Security and Medicare over the tax cut, if given the choice. Most would trim the tax cuts to pay for education.
- Majorities agree that abortion should be legal generally.
- Although marriage of same sex couples makes them squeamish, most Americans oppose using the U.S. Constitution to ban the practice and they support some civil rights protections for same sex couples.
- Majorities want the government to allow importation of drugs from Canada and want less control over healthcare by the insurance companies, while the Administration's policies work in the opposite direction.
- The public strongly disagrees with the president on global warming, cutting back on clean air and water regulations, and many other environmental issues.
- Parents of school-age children do not want the government to use standardized tests to determine which schools and teachers get extra help and which ones are punished.

- Most Americans oppose provisions of the Patriot Act that allow the government to secretly search your home without telling you and secretly to comb through your library records.
- Even on the Iraqi war, a majority now believes the war was a mistake.

Lesson:

Issues are not the problem. Issues alone cannot be the answer.

How valuable were values?

The importance of “values” to the outcome of the election has been hotly debated ever since the news consortium exit poll showed that the category “moral values” was at the top of a list of reasons why voters chose a candidate. Unusual? Not really. In both the 2000 and 1996 Presidential elections, the Los Angeles Times’ national exit poll results placed values at the top of the issue pyramid of why voters chose one candidate over the other. In those elections, as in this year’s, the Republican candidate attracted more of the morality voters than did the Democrat.

What do voters mean when they say a presidential candidate shares their values? Two days after the election BRS began a survey of voters in Ohio that asked, “What was the most important thing that told you [Bush/Kerry] share your values?”

Overall, 22% of voters in Ohio mention “morality,” “religion,” or moral issues such as abortion or gay marriage as the marker they use to determine if a candidate shares their values.

The most often mentioned definitions of values after morals are:

- a candidate’s position on the economy (17%);
- a desire for change (11%);
- a candidate’s position on the Iraq war (10%); and
- a candidate’s approach to terrorism and national security (9%).

The overall results mask the deep divisions between Democratic and Republican voters. Bush voters were looking for morality and religious messages to judge a candidate’s values, while Kerry voters measure a candidate’s values by his attention to secular needs such as jobs, dealing with the war, and health care, and representing a change from President Bush.

Top Indications that Candidate Shared Your Values

Bush voters		Kerry voters	
Morals/Christian/abortion/gay marriage	40%	Economy/jobs	28%
Terrorism/national security	17	Against Bush/for change	21
Iraq/war	7	Iraq/war/foreign policy	18
Experience/good job in last 4 yrs.	6	Healthcare	12
Honesty	6	He cares about people like me	9
Vote against Kerry	6	Morals/abortion/gay marriage	6

BRS Survey: Voters in Ohio; N=660; October 4 to October 9, 2004.

This question reveals the two worlds that Democrats and Republicans live in; it shows that while the moral issues have been for years a motivating factor of the Republican base vote, there are large segments of Americans who consider attention to secular needs a measure of a candidate's values.

The candidates and parties

The race for President is not as much about party or issue as it is about this question: To which candidate can Americans entrust their security, livelihoods, and futures? For all but the quarter of electorate on each side that makes up the hard-core partisan party loyalists, it is a personal decision.

The campaign is always about the incumbent – it is a referendum on whether to re-hire the guy who has been working for you for four years. Americans hold him responsible for the direction the country has taken during his watch. For the Democrats, this should have been easy.

The point in tracking polls when Kerry's vote left him was about the time people across America were asking: How can I trust him to defend me, my family, and my country when he is not man enough to defend himself against these swift boat charges?

Two campaign ironies sum up the race:

#1 A genuine war hero allows himself to be cast as a weak patriot by a draft dodger, who is then hailed as a warrior.

#2 The first Roman Catholic candidate since John Kennedy loses the Catholic vote that his party has held for the last three Presidential elections.

Taking stands on controversial issues

Kerry did not lose the election because of an issue or a set of issues. He lost because he did not connect with voters. It's not the position as much as the ability to identify, to understand, to empathize, to lead.

For example, Howard Dean's answer to gay marriage question was to tell a story of an 80-year-old gay marine who approached the governor after a speech to thank him for a civil union law he signed. Dean's punch line was – how can I tell this man, who bled and was prepared to die for his country in wartime, who obeys the laws and pays his taxes, that he does not have the same rights as you or me? End of story.

Dean's approaches to abortion and gun control were similarly effective. John McCain is another person who connects. Liberals give money to McCain without knowing his aggressively conservative views because "he's a straight shooter." When they find out his shots are aimed at their programs they stare in disbelief.

If issues matter so much, why did one out of every three voters who call themselves pro-choice vote for President Bush?

If it is political death to take a stand contrary to public opinion on the leading national issue, why did all seven Senators who voted against the resolution allowing the President to go to war win their reelections?

When considering all the possible reasons that George Bush won a second term in office, some people point to the Democratic Party and assert it has an image problem? Yes, perhaps it does. But this is a separate question from why the Democratic candidate lost the election. The election of a President for most Americans is primarily about evaluating two people.

Over time, however, party identification can impact many elections for state legislatures, governors, and Congress, and there is no question that Democrats have work to do.

II. The road ahead

A. Party and purpose and a progressive agenda

At a Harvard University post-mortem conference on the 1984 Presidential campaign Lee Atwater turned to me and said: “My party’s challenge will be to win over the yuppies in the suburbs who like the Republican Party because we let them keep more of their money and still hold onto our religious right southern base.”

With one sentence in the hallway outside the conference room, Atwater articulated a vision for the party – he knew his audience. Then his party went out and executed a message for 20 years that has played to that audience: ‘government should not be anti-family or anti-faith and we will lower your taxes.’ A well-funded, disciplined approach has advanced the Republican Party to currently control all branches of the government: executive, legislative, and judicial.

Democrats can only take comfort in the fact that even with all the Republican money and organization, the nation is divided evenly in Presidential elections. This means there are millions of Americans who are not buying what the Republican Party is selling.

What exactly is the Democratic Party selling? The Democratic Party does not have the same clarity of purpose. Maybe it never will, but it would benefit by having a purpose other than simply winning elections.

In the months ahead we will hear many voices that say the lesson of this election is that in order to challenge the President one needs to be more like him. My answer to them is this: we need to know more about what Americans want that is not included in Atwater’s formula.

We should learn more about those who are left out of the Republican purpose:

- working families who are hurt by Republican policies on the economy and health care;
- voters who are concerned about privacy and government intrusion into their lives;
- millions of Americans who care about due process, individual rights, and who do see a danger in government-funded religion; and

- the many others in our country who yearn for a leader would say: The United States does not advance its own security by attacking a country that does not pose an immediate threat to us and is one of the most inhospitable countries in the Middle East to Islamic fundamentalism (what the politicians call “those terrorists”).

During this election, Democrats concentrated on getting huge votes from the cities, and for the most part they succeeded. Republicans have a non-geographic definition of their base – they will go to cities, suburbs, or rural America to talk to people of conservative faith and to the taxophobic. We saw this in the New Mexico, Pennsylvania, Ohio, and Florida returns. Democrats won the Democratic counties but got swamped in the counties that are usually more closely divided.

The voters seek candidates who will listen to what is in our hearts, so that they may lead our minds to do what is best for our country. Polls and focus groups should inform a politician or a party on how to lead, not how to follow.

This raises the question: Is there a set of organizing principles (not an issue) to win back some of those women, Catholics, Hispanics, and older voters?

B. Where do we go from here: Four ideas for action

Vision develops from understanding voters. It is derived from empathy, not policies. It is not a set of proposals, but a frame for fitting all the pieces of your message on the same board.

Understanding voters requires careful, sustained listening and patience and flexibility. Here are four ideas for finding purpose in a party and advancing a promising presidential candidate.

First, set up a formal or informal group that scouts, encourages, highlights and trains governors. These are the people with stories to tell and jobs that connect with people, and they are usually people with the temperament to be President. Start by making grants to encourage governors to write articles on policies and then have them debate their differences in public forums. By bringing them together, it provides a training camp for evaluating who will compete for the starting lineup when the season begins. I once told an extremely intelligent and talented but untelegenic public official who wanted to run for president that he needed to put all of his policy papers aside, stop reading, and spend three days a week hosting a home-town cable television talk show. He desperately needed practice for what he would encounter in the campaign. The advice was dismissed, and ultimately so was the candidate.

Second, send the best people to two or three key states (perhaps Ohio, Arkansas, New Mexico, and Florida) in a four-year effort to understand voters' values on a deep level. Have professionals who know how to listen and learn be in touch with the best listeners from states who know the psychological terrain. The intensive values-message work should not be an effort to win a vote next month or next year, but to begin to understand where people stand, what motivates them, and what feelings people have for the two parties. Find out what is missing, and where the party shares a common purpose. The gains that progressives have made in Montana are a positive example of what is possible.

EXAMPLE: Two years ago, the environmental community sent BRS to western Montana where their spokespeople had to endure death threats when they went on the radio. They were losing the zoning votes in the Flathead, they were losing on protecting their rivers from development pollution, and they were losing on protecting the Rocky Mountain Front.

Flathead Lake area makes up some of the prettiest land on the continent. We flew to Kalispell and spent time listening to their problems and views, then conducted a series of focus groups, and in short, presented the following conclusion: The people who are trying to kill you have the same values as you do. They want the same Montana. They just hate the way you talk to them, the way you dress, and the way you reason. Step back, create a coalition that lets others in the community lead with the values you share with the good ol' boys. Working with some very talented people on the ground from Resource Media we stayed with them and consulted a lot, as the environmental community created coalitions that built bridges to those on the other side.

RESULT: The people of Western Montana have changed zoning laws to be more protective of Flathead Lake, a super-mall scheduled to be built in Kalispell has been shelved, a Democrat was elected locally for the first time in memory in Kalispell, and President Bush backed off oil development of the Rocky Mountain Front because of concerns of coalitions of hunters and ranchers. The smart work of local environmentalists helped to elect a new Democratic governor and state legislature in Montana on November second. That same day a small, dedicated group, with a small media budget defeated a pro-mining ballot initiative, backed by a multi-million dollar campaign from the industry. We won 58%-42%. Is Montana becoming another Santa Monica? No, but it's policies and public officials are beginning to reflect more the views of its people.

The lesson to take from Montana? Learn the local values. Learn the local values. Learn the local values. As longtime Columbus-based Democratic political consultant Jerry Austin commented earlier this year: "I smell the same Massachusetts genius in the Kerry campaign that I smelled in the crowd that gave us President Dukakis. The people of Ohio play softball and touch football, they don't ski or wind-surf."

Third, fund very local efforts. Start with candidates for school board of city councils. Twenty years ago, Christian fundamentalists began running for local school boards across the country with the goal of inserting their views into education and government. Today, they have seen many successes. They have many colleagues in the Congress and, most importantly, one in the White House.

Progressives and Democrats can do the same. This past election, Democrats changed state legislative chambers from R to D in Colorado (House and Senate), Oregon (Senate), North Carolina (House) and Vermont (House) and Montana (Senate). Something is going on at the grass roots that could serve to inform national politics and national parties.

Fourth, the funders should pledge not to use the same advice from those who read the topline data from polls and tell candidates: “Accept some tax cuts, vote for the war, run on Social Security and Medicare, and keep your head down until the other side stops pummeling you.”

Progressives and Democrats need to find the common purpose that is missing, decide what values they are appealing to, and not back down when challenged.

- John Russonello, Nancy Belden, and Kate Stewart
With assistance from Rachel Sternfeld