

THE 2000 PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION OF GEORGE W. BUSH: THE DIFFICULT BIRTH OF A PRESIDENCY

James E. Campbell

How did Republican presidential candidate George W. Bush emerge from the presidential election of 2000 as the nation's forty-third president? In the most immediate sense, the answer in one word is Florida. Florida was the pivotal state. Its 25 electoral votes determined the national electoral vote winner and its popular vote division was almost perfectly divided between Bush and Democratic presidential contender Al Gore. The near perfect division of the state's vote was about the only thing near perfect in determining whether Bush or Gore would receive the state's crucial electoral votes. A variety of disputes, regarding issues from ballot design to whether paper ballots were properly punched and the absence of clear-cut standards in place prior to election day, were all part of what became the Florida fiasco. With the election hanging in the balance, the Gore campaign challenged the initial vote count that narrowly awarded the state to Bush. In the end, the contending sides resorted to the courts to resolve the dispute and they did, upholding the certified vote count of a Bush plurality. Democrats would charge that a Republican-dominated U.S. Supreme Court intervened inappropriately to prevent a recount of Florida's votes in several counties ordered by the Supreme Court of Florida state. Republicans countercharged that the U.S. Supreme Court properly prevented an activist Florida state Supreme Court from usurping the constitutional powers of Florida's state legislature and conducting a highly selective recount with arbitrary standards adopted after the election had been held.¹

While no one can dispute that voting procedures in Florida were flawed, that Florida's electoral votes were decisive to the election's outcome, that local issues may have played an important role in Florida's popular vote, and that the legal disputes involved resolving an unsettling conflict between established laws and efforts to obtain an objective vote count, the Florida vote was decisive to the election only in the most immediate sense. The 2000 election boiled down to Florida, but Florida was certainly not the whole

story. In a broader sense, George W. Bush's election was national and political rather than local and legal. The Florida vote and the U.S. Supreme Court's ruling became important because Bush had elsewhere fought Al Gore to a virtual draw. How did this happen?

To answer this question requires that we first take note that the 2000 election was certainly the closest election of the twentieth century and, in some respects, the closest presidential election since popular voting for president became prevalent in the 1828 election. The election of 2000 was the first since the election of 1888 in which the winner of the electoral vote majority failed to win a plurality of the national popular vote. While George W. Bush received 271 electoral votes to Gore's 266, Gore received 50.266 per cent of the national two-party popular vote to 49.734 percent for Bush. As noted above, Bush's electoral vote victory depended on Florida and the final vote count in that state indicated a Bush margin of only 537 votes out of nearly 6 million votes cast by Floridians. A swing of merely 269 votes from Bush to Gore in Florida would have elected Gore to the presidency.² Of course, Florida was not the only key state in 2000. Five other states were decided by vote pluralities of fewer than 10,000 votes. Moreover, if Gore had carried his home state of Tennessee with its eleven electoral votes, or President Clinton's state of Arkansas with its six electoral votes, or the previously bedrock Democratic state of West Virginia with its five electoral votes, Bush would have been denied his victory regardless of how Florida was decided.³

In such an extraordinarily close election as 2000, there is no single answer as to why Bush was able to come so close to Gore's totals that he was able to assemble an electoral vote majority. There are, instead, many answers. Virtually any factor that helped Bush gain a significant number of votes or kept Gore from claiming those votes may have made the difference. This rules out as possible explanations of the Bush victory factors that helped Gore or hurt Bush's prospects with voters. In the middle ground are those factors that may have helped to make the election so close. Factors that made the election close, rather than being a net help to either Bush or Gore, also in a way made Bush's election more possible.

In table 2.1 I have identified the important elements of the 2000 presidential election and have grouped them into three categories: those that favored Gore, those that tightened the race between Bush and Gore, and those that favored Bush. It is this latter group that is most important in explaining the election's outcome. According to this analysis, several important short-term conditions entering the election year favored Gore and, thus, could not have helped in the election of Bush. Gore was the vice president and successor candidate to a popular incumbent. His party also held the White House during a period of prosperity that carried well into the election year. These are generally advantages that are difficult for an opponent to surmount. However, tempering these advantages were longer term and perennial forces for competition as well as a number of short-term reactions to the candidates and issues that were in balance. Beyond these considerations,

Table 2.1 An inventory of potential influences on the 2000 presidential election

Factors that hurt Bush and/or helped Gore	Factors that helped Bush and/or hurt Gore	Factors increasing the closeness of election
Presidential approval Economic growth	Internal party unity The debates Gore prospective and combative strategy	Balance of party identification No incumbent in race Competitive effect of the campaign and the conventions Balanced perceptions of candidates Balanced evaluations of the issues

three factors would work in favor of Bush: greater Republican Party unity, pro-Bush reactions to the presidential debates, and the decision of the Gore campaign to run a prospective and contentious campaign rather than a conciliatory retrospective campaign emphasizing the achievements of the Clinton administration. We begin the discussion of the three sets of election elements with an examination of those conditions that favored the election of Al Gore.⁴

CONDITIONS FAVORABLE TO GORE

Many political observers and all of the academic statistical forecasting models suggested that the 2000 election was Gore's to lose.⁵ The reason for this was that the conditions at the outset of the campaign were favorable to the Democrats as the in-party. Most Americans were satisfied with the direction the nation was headed, approved of the job performance of President Clinton (despite various tawdry scandals and his impeachment), and were pleased by the strong performance of the national economy as the election approached. These positive impressions of conditions under the Clinton administration were strong signs that the nation was inclined to continue this leadership under Clinton's vice president and would-be successor Al Gore. As a successor candidate, rather than the incumbent himself, Gore might not be accorded full credit for the Clinton record, but as the standard-bearer of the same party and as Clinton's loyal vice president, both Clinton and the record of the past few years were considerable assets for the Gore campaign.

Table 2.2 presents evidence of conditions and the reactions of Americans to those conditions at the outset of the 2000 election year and, for comparison, at similar times entering the previous two election years. The table reports the actual annual growth in the economy for the two previous years. It also reports poll results from the Gallup Poll of the percentage of respondents who indicated that they thought that economic conditions were good or excellent, were satisfied with the way things were going in the nation, and approved of the job performance of the president. By each of these four measures, 2000 was a better year for the in-party than either 1992 or 1996 and while 1992 conditions were not good enough to reelect the incumbent

Table 2.2 National conditions leading into the presidential campaign, 1992–2000

Pre-campaign indicators of national conditions and reactions to in-party	1992 (%)	1996 (%)	2000 (%)
Average economic growth rate in previous two years (GDP through first quarter of the election year)	0.5	3.1	4.6
Rate economic conditions as excellent or good (April or May)	12	30	60
Satisfied with “the way things are going in the United States” (April or May)	20	37	59
Presidential job approval (May)	39	55	57

Sources: The Gallup Poll, U.S. Bureau of Economic Analysis, and Congressional Quarterly Weekly Reports. The public opinion data are from surveys conducted in April or May of the election year. The economic growth rate is the average annual growth rate in the GDP from the first quarter of the second year of the president’s term to the first quarter of the fourth year of the term.

(Bush the elder) that year, conditions in 1996 were good enough to reelect Bill Clinton.

The favorable conditions for the in-party in 2000 measure up against previous elections as well and they remained strong up to the election. The president’s approval rating of 57 percent in May, that presumably reflected bottom-line impressions of the president (personal as well as policy-based), were even a bit higher in June (60 percent) and July (59 percent) of the election year and remained strong up to the election.⁶ The median presidential approval ratings in the summer months before an election (since 1948) have been around 50–52 percent. In-party candidates who have gone on to win the election have had slightly higher ratings, typically in the range of 54–56 percent. The historical association between presidential approval and the November vote, however, indicates that any approval rating higher than the mid-40s is a good omen for the in-party.⁷ With this perspective, public reactions to the Clinton record indicated that they were primed to be Gore voters.

The economy also strongly favored Gore. Economic growth (as measured in real gross domestic product (GDP) growth) in the two years running up to the election had been strong and this was not lost on voters. In the two years running up to the election (through the first quarter of the election year), the economy averaged an annual growth rate of 4.6 percent. Even with a slight slowing of the economy in the third quarter (July through September an annualized GDP growth rate of 2.2 percent), the economy grew at an annualized rate of 4.2 percent from January to September. GDP growth in the critical second quarter of the election year was stronger than it had been in 10 of the 13 elections from 1948 to 1996.⁸

The economy leading into the 2000 election was not only stronger than the economy under which Clinton was reelected four years earlier, it was strong relative to past election year economies and stronger than what voters

have required before giving the in-party credit for successfully managing the economy. An analysis of election year economies from 1948 to 1996 indicates that voters reward the in-party for economies growing at annual rates over 2.5 percent.⁹ The economy that Gore inherited was growing at a much stronger rate and, moreover, voters were quite aware of this. In May of 2000, an impressive two-thirds of respondents in the Gallup Poll indicated that they thought that the economy was in good or excellent shape. In October, even though the economy was growing at a bit slower rate, 71 percent characterized the economy in these very positive terms.¹⁰ In short, going into the 2000 election there was every reason to believe that the public was in a very receptive mood toward the in-party and, as the candidate of the in-party, Al Gore would be the beneficiary of these conditions.¹¹ However, conditions do not vote. It was up to the Gore campaign to convert these hospitable conditions into hard votes.

CONDITIONS FAVORABLE TO A CLOSE ELECTION

Five different conditions of the 2000 campaign favored a close election. The first of these is the near parity of party identifiers between Democrats and Republicans in the electorate. Table 2.3 presents the distribution of party identifiers from 1952 to 2000 who reported that they voted. The data are drawn from National Election Study (NES) surveys and corrected for over or underrepresentation of presidential voters. That is, if the NES survey indicated that 55 percent of respondents said that they voted for a particular candidate and only 52 percent of actual voters nationally voted for that candidate, the data was weighted to bring it into line with the actual vote. The elections are grouped to reflect the changes in partisanship over the decades. Partisanship in the 1950s and early 1960s was strong, with few independents, and there were many more Democrats than Republicans. Democrats maintained their dominance in the late-1960s and 1970s. There were signs of a slight dealignment in these elections, though independents averaged fewer than 10 percent of voters in the period. The partisan

Table 2.3 The partisanship of American voters, 1952–2000

Elections	Democrats	Independents	Republicans	Gap
1952–1964	54.6	6.9	38.5	+16.1
1968–1980	53.1	9.1	37.8	+15.3
1984–1996	47.8	7.4	44.9	+2.9
2000	48.1	7.2	44.7	+3.4

Note: The mean percentages are computed from corrected National Election Study data. The data have been corrected for unrepresentativeness as reflected in discrepancies between the aggregate actual and the reported national presidential vote. Based on the findings of Keith et al. (1992), reported independents who show a leaning toward one of the parties are counted as partisans of that party. The “Party Gap” is the percentage of voters who are Democrats minus the percentage who are Republicans.

Source: Adapted from table A.5 of Campbell (2000, 216).

realignment of the 1980s is evident in the distribution of partisans since 1984. With the realignment of the 1980s, the gap in the numbers of Democrats and Republicans dropped from about 15 or 16 percentage points to about 3 percentage points and the number of independents receded almost to where it was in the 1950s and early 1960s. Since 1984, the Democratic Party's advantage in voting partisans has almost disappeared. The American electorate has been realigned to a competitive balance between the parties.¹² In the 2000 election, about 48 percent of voters identified more or less with the Democrats and about 45 percent identified more or less with the Republicans.

A second condition favoring a close election was the absence of an incumbent in the race. Elections with an incumbent as a candidate are usually not close and those without an incumbent often are. Table 2.4 presents the track record for these two types of presidential elections from 1828 to 2000. Over this period there were 44 presidential elections, 19 without incumbents as candidates and 25 with incumbents in the race. Of the 25 elections with incumbents in the race, only two were extremely close (with the winning candidate receiving 51.5 percent or less of the two-party vote). This represents less than 10 percent of elections with incumbents. Of the 19 elections without incumbent candidates, 7 were this close (37 percent). In comparative terms, a near dead-heat election (such as 2000) is more than four times more likely when there is no incumbent in the race. As very well-known quantities,

Table 2.4 Incumbency and election margins, 1828–2000

Size of popular vote for the winning candidate (two-party vote %)	No incumbent in the race	Incumbent was in the race
Near dead-heats (under 50% to 51.5%)	7 (37%)	2 (8%)
Competitive (51.6–57.5%)	8 (42%)	13 (52%)
Landslides (57.6–65.2%)	4 (21%)	10 (40%)
Total	19	25

Note: In “near dead-heat” elections the victorious presidential candidate received a popular vote percentage below 51.5% of the popular two-party vote. In “competitive” elections the winning presidential vote was between 51.6% and 57.5% of the two-party vote. In “landslide” elections the winning candidate received more than 57.6% of the national two-party popular vote. The landslide elections without an incumbent in the race were in 1836 (Van Buren over Harrison), 1856 (Buchanan over Fremont and Fillmore), 1920 (Harding over Cox), and 1928 (Hoover over Smith). The latter two cases were both in a dominant Republican era. The two near dead-heats with incumbents were in 1988 (the rematch of Harrison over Cleveland) and 1976 (Carter over Ford). Incumbents include presidents who succeeded to the office upon the death or resignation of a president. The nonincumbent races were in 1868, 1876, 1880, 1884, 1896, 1908, 1920, 1928, 1952, 1960, 1968, 1988, and 2000.

incumbents are either revered and coast to an easy victory or, less frequently, have galvanized opinion against them and are beaten soundly. In either case, the election is not close. When there is no incumbent in the race, as in 2000, there is more uncertainty and the election tends to be much closer.

The candidates themselves also pulled the electorate to an evenly cast vote. Though they had similar backgrounds as sons of prominent politicians, being raised in circumstances of privilege and having attended the nation's most prestigious schools, they were very different people. Each had his strengths, but each also had his weaknesses, at least as the public perceived them. Table 2.5 presents the results of a *Newsweek* poll conducted in the closing weeks of the campaign. It is clear from this poll that about two-thirds of the nation found both candidates to be likeable and to possess strong leadership qualities. Half the survey thought that Gore reflected their views on most issues and half thought the same of Bush. Gore, however, was seen by more as the intelligent, informed, and caring candidate and Bush was seen by more as the honest, ethical, and candid candidate. In terms of the personal characteristics that voters look for in a president, the Bush-Gore contest was an equal match.

A fourth condition favoring a close election was the balance of voter evaluations regarding which party would be better able to deal with the most important problems that would face the nation. As a consideration in the electorate, the issues helped each party equally. To determine the likely impact of issues on the election, responses to questions regarding what voters considered to be the most important problem facing the nation were examined. The data are from the 2000 NES. In response to this question, respondents expressed concern for a wide array of problems. Several issues emerged with some regularity. Education, health care costs, Social Security and issues of particular concern to the elderly (e.g. prescription drug benefits

Table 2.5 Voter reactions to the candidates

Phrase posed to survey respondents	Percent agreeing that the phrase describes the candidate		Pro-Bush difference
	Gore	Bush	
<i>Equal strengths</i>			
"Is personally likeable"	67	71	+4
"Has strong leadership qualities"	65	65	0
"Shares your views on most political issues"	50	50	0
<i>Gore's strengths</i>			
"Is intelligent and well informed"	82	69	+13
"Cares about people like you"	60	53	+7
<i>Bush's strengths</i>			
"Is honest and ethical"	52	63	+11
"Says what he believes, not just what people want to hear"	49	58	+9

Source: *Newsweek* poll conducted by Princeton Survey Research Associates between October 18 and 20.

in Medicare), concerns about the moral decay of the country, the economy, crime, excessive government spending, and poverty were issues raised with some frequency.¹³ Respondents were then asked, which major political party, if either, would do a better job in dealing with the problem. With so many domestic issues at the top of the national agenda, one might have expected Democrats to have an issue advantage over Republicans. This, however, was not the case. As the figures in table 2.6 indicate, the public was divided right down the middle. According to the NES data (corrected to the actual national vote distribution), 28.5 percent of voters said that they thought that the Democrats could better handle the problem they thought was most important, the same percentage said they thought that the Republicans would do the better job, and the remaining 43 percent said that they thought that the parties would be equally adept at handling the issue. The combination of Bush's appeal to the center with his theme of "compassionate conservatism" and Gore's drift to the left with his theme of rectifying inequalities appears to have resulted in the electorate being split right down the middle.

The fifth condition favoring a close election was the campaign itself. Presidential campaigns tend to narrow the leads of front-runners and to produce relatively close election outcomes. As a result, presidential election results have been constrained within the range of 38–62 percent of the two-party vote. That is, winning candidates since the 1930s have received as much as 62 percent of the national two-party popular vote and losing major party candidates consistently receive at least 38 percent of the two-party vote.

Table 2.6 Voter evaluations of the party best able to deal with the most important problem facing the nation in 2000

Which political party do you think would be most likely to get the government to do a better job in dealing with the most important problem facing the nation?

Political party	% of voters
Republicans	28.5
Democrats	28.5
No difference/neither	43.0
Total	100.0

Note: The data are from the 2000 NES (V000438) and have been weighted to the actual division of the national popular vote. A cross-tabulation of responses to the question and the reported vote indicated that 50.97% were reported Gore voters, 45.15% were reported Bush voters, and 3.88% reported votes for other candidates. The actual vote divisions were 48.42% for Gore, 47.91% for Bush, and 3.68% for others. The ratio of the actual to NES vote percentages were used to weight responses to more accurately represent the actual electorate. The exact question wording, after asking respondents to identify the most important national problem, was: "Which political party do you think would be most likely to get the government to do a better job in dealing with this problem—the Republicans, the Democrats, or wouldn't there be much difference between them?"

Since 1868, more than a fifth (7 of 34) of presidential elections have been decided by a popular vote margin of less than 51–49 percent and more than a third (13 of 34) decided by a margin of less than 53–47 percent of the vote.

The reason that the election results are often so close is that their campaigns are so intensely competitive and because these campaigns refresh and reinvigorate partisanship.¹⁴ Presidential general election campaigns are well funded, receive intense media scrutiny, and are evenly matched in resources. As a result, they narrow the vote gap between the candidates. In addition, because general election campaigns redirect voter attention to differences between the major party candidates, rather than the differences within the parties that was the focus of attention in the nominating process, they refresh partisanship in voters. This is especially helpful to candidates who began the campaign season with a less unified party. In most cases, this is the candidate trailing in the polls. Bringing partisans back into the fold, helps the trailing candidate more than the front-runner (whose party is already united and enthusiastic) and, thereby, helps close the vote gap between them.

The narrowing effects of the 2000 campaign were first evident in the conventions. While the national nominating conventions are often regarded as the closing of the nominating process, they are better seen as the beginning of the general election campaign. The official introduction of the nominee to the party faithful and the nation. The conventions provide an excellent opportunity to mend fences after sometimes rough internal battles for the nomination. In 2000, despite Bush's troubles with Senator John McCain's candidacy and the seemingly easy route that Gore took to his party's nomination, easily fending off Senator Bill Bradley's challenge, Bush entered the 2000 race with a lead and a more united party behind him than did Gore. Bush led Gore in each of the 22 preference polls conducted by Gallup in 2000 up to the time of the first national convention. With a single exception, the Zogby Polls also consistently indicated a Bush lead throughout the spring and through midsummer. Going into the Republican convention in late July, Bush led Gore in the polls. The lead was approximately 55–45, averaging the Zogby and Gallup Polls. After the conventions, with Bush getting a poll bump from the Republican convention and Gore receiving a larger bump from the Democratic convention, the polls indicated that the race was virtually tied. An analysis of convention bumps in previous elections indicates that about half of the effects are temporary, but that about half carries through to election day.¹⁵

While there were ups and downs for both candidates throughout the remainder of the campaign, the overall effect of the campaign was to close any gap between the candidates. With Bush taking a slight lead in the polls after the debates, the closing weeks of the campaign brought more Democrats back to their party and this closed the gap. Table 2.7 presents the vote division of those making up their minds on how they would vote during the campaign (after the conventions through to election day). The figures here are very interesting in that Gore carried a plurality of these late-deciders, making up for Bush's plurality among early deciders (50.3 percent for Bush

Table 2.7 The vote division of late-deciding and vote intention changing voters

Reported vote	Late-deciders	Changers
Bush	45.1	49.1
Gore	49.0	39.2
Other	5.9	11.8
Total	100.0	100.1

Note: Late-deciders are voters who report having decided how they would vote after the party nominating conventions and those who changed their reported vote from how they said that they intended to vote in the pre-election NES wave of interviews. Changers are only those who changed their reported vote from how they said that they originally intended to vote. The data are NES data corrected to reflect the actual national vote division.

to 48.0 percent for Gore) and reflecting the greater number of Democrats among the late-deciders (46.7 percent Democrats to 40.6 percent Republicans); however, Bush actually received a sizeable plurality of those who changed their minds between the early stages of the campaign and election day. In other words, the campaign helped nail down support already leaning to Gore, but it also drew in support for Bush among a number who had intended to vote otherwise.

CONDITIONS FAVORABLE TO BUSH

There were three conditions that favored Bush in the 2000 election. The first of these was internal party unity of the parties. Republicans were more united and enthusiastic about Bush than Democrats were about Gore, though the experience of both candidates in seeking their party's nominations would seem to suggest the opposite. Gore had an easy time winning the Democratic nomination. He faced a single challenger, Senator Bill Bradley, and he won every primary. Bush, on the other hand, had a number of challengers and suffered several defeats, at the hand of Senator John McCain, along the way. The track records here, however, may be a bit misleading about party unity because of the McCain phenomenon and open primary rules in a number of states. McCain was able to do as well as he was because he was drawing from independents and even Democrats in some primaries. Thus, McCain's success, as far as it went, might have said as much about the lack of enthusiasm for Gore and Bradley as it said about Republican unity around the Bush candidacy.

Having lost the presidency in 1992 and again in 1996, and having suffered through the Clinton years, Republicans were eager to set aside internal differences and unite behind a standard-bearer. Bush was the candidate and the huge campaign war chest that he accumulated from a record number of contributors before the primaries, enough to allow him to forego public matching money and all the strings attached to it, reflected the fact that he

was the early choice of committed Republicans.¹⁶ Democrats, on the other hand, were less hungry for the White House. Having held the presidency for eight years, Democrats had lost the competitive edge that comes from being on the outside (perhaps as Republicans had lost it in 1992) and were less inclined to compromise for the sake of party unity and winning in November. Democratic Party unity may also have suffered because of the “vice president as candidate” problem. Sitting vice presidents have historically had a difficult time emerging from the shadows of the president under whom they serve. They must at once appear independent, but not disloyal to the president. This is not an easy task and only two sitting vice presidents since 1820 ran successfully for the presidency (Martin Van Buren in 1836 and George Bush in 1988).

This difference in party unity may have been most reflected in the fates of the “third-party” candidacies of Ralph Nader with the Green Party and Pat Buchanan with the Reform Party. Nader’s candidacy challenged Gore and the Democrats from the political left and Buchanan’s candidacy challenged Bush and the Republicans from the political right. Both the Nader and Buchanan candidacies fared poorly in terms of percentages of the national popular vote, but Nader received nearly 2.9 million votes nationally (2.7 percent of the vote) while Buchanan received fewer than half a million votes (0.4 percent of the vote). In Florida alone, Nader received more than 97,000 votes. With Nader appealing to liberal voters who usually vote for the Democrats and Buchanan to conservative voters inclined to the Republicans, the greater strength of the Nader candidacy suggests that fewer otherwise likely Democratic voters were inclined to compromise their values in order to win the White House. Gallup Polls through the summer months similarly indicated that Republicans were more united behind Bush than Democrats were behind Gore.¹⁷

Party differences in enthusiasm for their respective candidates, even at the end of the campaign, can also be seen in the strength of preferences among loyal partisans. While 77 percent of Democrats voting for Gore said that their preference was strong, 82 percent of Republicans voting for Bush indicated a strong preference. Even among nonvoting partisans the difference was evident. While 71 percent of nonvoting Democrats indicated that they would have voted for Gore if they had voted, 79 percent of nonvoting Republicans indicated that they would have voted for Bush if they had turned out to vote.

Public reactions to the three presidential debates held in October were a second factor helping the Bush campaign. It is one of the many ironies of the 2000 campaign that the candidate who was reluctant to debate and thought to be at a disadvantage in debates (Bush) was helped by the debates and that the candidate generally thought more adept in a debate format (Gore) would be hurt by the debates. The debate experiences of 2000 may also reveal more about the kinds of effects debates may have on presidential campaigns. Table 2.8 presents aggregated responses to three Gallup Poll questions pertinent to evaluating the effects of the three presidential debates on the election.

Table 2.8 Effects of the presidential debates

Debate	Debate performance evaluation (Bush% – Gore%)	Effected favorably by the debate (Bush% – Gore%)	Preference poll shift from before to after debate (two-party division for Bush)
First debate	-7	+7	+4.8
Second debate	+13	+16	+2.3
Third debate	-2	+2	+1.6
Overall Shift			+7.3

Note: The debate performance was based on responses by likely voters to Gallup's question "Regardless of which candidate you happen to support, who do you think did the better job in the debate?" Plus values indicate that more people thought Bush did the better job and minus values indicate that more thought Gore did the better job. The effect question asked respondents: "Has your opinion of [the candidate] been affected by the debate?" They answered separately for the two candidates and could indicate a positive, negative, or no effect of the debate. Only the favorable percentages are used here, though percentages of those indicating a negative indicate the same Bush advantage. After each debate the percentage indicating that they thought less of Gore were greater than the percentage indicating a lowered opinion of Bush. The preference poll ("If the election were held today, who would you vote for?") shifts were based on averaging Gallup Poll and Zogby Poll percentages and taking the differences of the three-day tracking polls conducted before and after each debate. As with debates in past years, there was some drift back to previous support levels by the time of the next debate (1.1% back to Gore by the time of the second debate and 0.3% back to Gore by the time of the third debate). These drift backs account for the difference between the sum of apparent individual debate effects and the net overall change from before the first debate until after the third.

The first question asked respondents to evaluate who performed better or worse in the debates, regardless of the respondent's personal preference. The second question asked whether the debate caused the respondent to be more or less favorably inclined toward a candidate. The final column presents how the preference poll margin changed from before to after the debate.

Based on responses to the first question, evaluation of the candidates' debate performances would appear to be a draw. Gore was seen by more as doing better in the first debate. Bush was seen as doing better in the second and the candidates were judged as performing about equally well in the third debate. However, the question of who won or lost the debate may not mean much to the effects of the debate on the election. As the second column of table 2.8 indicates, more respondents came out of each of the debates having more favorable views of Bush than increasing their estimation of Gore. Negative impressions of Gore also increased in each of the debates. In effect, Bush helped himself and Gore hurt himself in the debates and this was reflected in the preference polls. Despite slippage back to prior support levels in the days after each debate, Bush gained about 7 percentage points on Gore from before the first debate until after the third. Gore went into the debates with a slight lead and came out slightly behind Bush.

The debate experience in 2000 suggests that the political consequences of debates do not depend on winning or losing the debate as an event. Voters know that they are not electing the debater in chief. It may also be a mistake to interpret the 2000 debates as simply reflecting lower expectations of Bush and higher expectations for Gore, though this may well have been part of what happened. The debates of 2000, like debates in past years, may have

been important because they reinforced or disabused voters of images that had been built up about the candidates. The 1988 debates may have hurt Michael Dukakis, not because he fell short of expectations, but because they (especially his response to Bernard Shaw's question regarding the death penalty) reinforced views of him as a rather cold-blooded policy wonk. The 1980 debates may have helped Ronald Reagan because they disabused voters of the view that Reagan was reckless and extreme. In the 2000 election, George W. Bush had been portrayed as not intellectually up to the presidency and Al Gore was seen by many as ingratiating and a bit condescending. Watching the debates may have disabused some voters of their prior concerns about Bush and reinforced concerns that they had about Gore.

The final, and probably the most important, condition favoring the Bush candidacy was the decision by Gore to pursue a prospective, combative, class-politics campaign strategy rather than a retrospective, consensus-oriented, economic growth strategy. With a strong economy and with general public satisfaction with the Clinton administration, most observers expected Gore to adopt the latter approach to the campaign. For the most part, the statistical forecasting models of the vote also expected Gore to work on translating the favorable conditions that he had inherited from Clinton into votes. Whether he was wary of being tainted with Clinton's scandals, wanted to avoid being overshadowed by Clinton, was concerned that his partisan base needed shoring up, or was sincerely committed ideologically, Gore chose not to run on the record of the Clinton administration and instead ran on the message of "social justice" and class politics. The message came through loud and clear in Gore's acceptance speech at the Democratic convention:

This election is not an award for past performance. I'm not asking you to vote for me on the basis of the economy we have. Tonight I ask for your support on the basis of the better, fairer, more prosperous America we can build together. Together, let's make sure that our prosperity enriches not just the few, but all working families. Let's invest in health care, education, a secure retirement, and middle-class tax cuts. To all the families who have to struggle to afford the right education and the skyrocketing costs of prescription drugs, I want you to know this: I've taken on the powerful forces, and as president, I'll stand up to them and I'll stand up for you.

Gore's non-Clinton, prospective strategy was evident throughout the campaign. As an example, Gore was so intent on avoiding a link with Clinton that he did not mention the president by name even once during any of the three presidential debates. In the campaign's closing hours, Gore's decision to use Clinton was so out of keeping with his campaign to that point that a front-page headline in the *New York Times* the day before the election read: "Vice President Invokes Clinton Name During 19-Hour Swing."¹⁸

In an election that was replete with mistakes, from the news media's on-again-off-again calling of the election winner to Bush's mispronunciation of "subliminal" to the Florida balloting systems to some of the polls that bounced around erratically to the sizeable errors of a number of forecasting

Table 2.9 Percent of the vote for the in-party candidate among those whose retrospective evaluations were positive in previous elections and in the 2000 election

	Median	Gore in 2000	Difference
Percent voting for the in-party presidential candidate among those who:			
(1) thought that the nation's economy had gotten better over the past year	77	69	-8
(2) approved of the incumbent's handling of the economy	88	67	-21
(3) approved of the way the incumbent was handling his job as president	81	74	-7

Sources. Computed from tables 7-4, 7-5, and 7-6 of Abramson, Aldrich, and Rohde (2002). The data were originally collected by the NES. These questions have not been asked in all NES studies. The medians are thus based on different sets of elections. The median of questions (1) and (2) above are based on the five election studies from 1980 to 1996. The median for the general approval question (3) is based on the seven elections from 1972 to 1996.

models, the costliest mistake of all may have been Gore's decision to pursue a prospective strategy.

Table 2.9 presents the percentage of votes that the in-party presidential candidate received from those voters who had positive impressions of the economy and the record, more generally, of the outgoing administration. As we noted previously, a substantial majority of voters in 2000 had positive evaluations of the national economy, President Clinton's handling of the economy, and President Clinton's overall performance in office. Did Gore's decision not to emphasize the record and his association with it cost him the votes of these voters?

The data in table 2.9 suggests that Gore's decision was quite costly and very well may have made the difference between winning and losing the election.¹⁹ In the typical election, the in-party candidate has received more than three-quarters of the votes of those that thought the economy had gotten better in the previous year. Al Gore received fewer than 70 percent of these votes. In the typical election, the in-party candidate has received almost 90 percent of the votes of those who approved of the president's handling of the economy. Gore received only two-thirds of these votes. Finally, the in-party candidate typically receives more than four out of five votes of those who approve of the president's job performance. Gore received fewer than three out of four of these votes. In short, by each of these measures, among voters who were pleased about national conditions going into the election year (and this was a significant majority in 2000), Gore was accorded less credit and received a smaller share of their votes than did in-party candidates in past years.²⁰

There are two possible reasons why Gore received so little credit from the positive assessments by so many voters of conditions going into the election. Since Gore was not the incumbent, but the would-be successor candidate of the in-party, voters might not have accorded him full credit or full blame for

the record of his predecessor. Indeed, a recent individual-level analysis of economic voting by Nadeau and Lewis-Beck found that “when an elected incumbent is not running, economic voters are less retrospective.”²¹ Both a national presidential forecasting model and a state-level presidential forecasting model incorporating the difference between incumbents and their successors as in-party candidates also find that successor candidates receive about half the credit or blame for economic conditions as incumbents would personally.²² Still, successor candidates do receive some credit or blame and Gore appears to have received substantially less credit than would have been expected. For comparison, the last successor in-party candidate was George Bush in 1988, a candidate whose “stay the course” campaign theme suggested a vote for Bush was the next-best-thing to vote for a third Reagan term. Among those who thought the economy was getting better, Bush (the elder) in 1988 received 63 percent of the vote, compared to the 56 percent that Gore received from voters with these views in 2000. Bush (the elder) as a successor candidate also did considerably better than Gore among those who approved of the president’s handling of the economy (80 versus 67 percent) and among those who generally approved of the president’s job performance (79 versus 74 percent).

The second reason that Gore may have received so little credit among those voters with positive views of the record is that Gore failed to emphasize the record. He did not ask for credit. Conditions do not vote, voters vote. It is the job of the candidate and his campaign to remind voters of compelling reasons to vote for the candidate. Some voters may make the connection between strong economic growth and the in-party candidate, but others may not and others may need a bit of convincing that the in-party’s policies had something to do with the nation’s prosperity. Gore apparently lost a number of votes among these latter groups. Moreover, in running a prospective campaign, Gore opened himself up to questions of why the administration he had been a part of had not succeeded in adopting these policies over the previous eight years. When it came to the issues of revitalizing education, the patients’ bill of rights, providing financial stability for Social Security, adding prescription drug benefits for the elderly, and cutting taxes in an equitable manner, some voters asked why they would think that Gore could accomplish in another four years what Clinton–Gore had not been able to accomplish in the previous eight years.

CONCLUSION

There is no easy single answer to why George W. Bush emerged from the 2000 election as president. Some have said that the key to the election was Florida, or the Electoral College system, or even Supreme Court Justice Scalia. But these answers miss the bigger picture. The 2000 election was a nail-biter for political reasons, some of a historical nature (such as the balance of party identification), some that are systematically political (such as the inherent competitiveness of presidential election campaigns), and some

that were peculiar to the candidates that the two parties put forward for this election (the balance of both personal qualities and issue appeals). Each candidate also had some distinct advantages. Gore, as the in-party candidate, had a strong economy and a popular (if scandal tainted) predecessor in President Clinton. Even for a successor candidate of the in-party, these conditions offered a strong wind at his back. On the other hand, Bush had a party that was hungrier for victory, after having suffered losses in the two previous presidential elections.

In the end, if you must isolate what may have made the crucial difference in 2000 (and not to minimize the soundness of the decisions of the Bush campaign), the decision by the Gore campaign not to run a retrospective campaign was probably the turning point for the election. Gore may well have emerged as the forty-third president had he emphasized the economic track record of the Clinton administration and had he asked the outgoing president to campaign for him. There is no question that there would have been a downside to bringing Clinton into the campaign. He might have overshadowed Gore. It would certainly have brought the various scandals of the administration to the forefront. But in the end, the approval ratings for President Clinton tell the story. When voters took everything into account—the scandals, the impeachment, the failure on health care reform but also the economy and the show-down with the Republicans over the budget and the closing of the government—a large majority (57 percent) approved of the President's overall job performance. This was a winnable base on which to run, but Gore decided otherwise. Like many presidential elections in which a new party is elected to the presidency, the 2000 presidential election was one that was more lost than won.

Emerging as the forty-third president from a virtually tied national election and the controversy surrounding the Florida vote count fiasco (the first crisis of this presidency), George W. Bush faced the unenviable task of assuming the presidency of a divided nation. While some pundits questioned whether the nation as a whole would accept the legitimacy of the Bush presidency, those concerns were quickly dispelled. A late November 2000 Gallup Poll indicated that 86 percent of Americans, including 77 percent of Democrats, were prepared to accept Bush as the legitimate president.²³ Still, the incoming president confronted the challenge of using presidential powers to redirect the government in a more conservative direction while also recognizing that the nation was evenly divided politically. The campaign theme of "compassionate conservatism" seemed well suited for this challenge.

While all presidents must strike a balance between pursuing policies that reflect their principles and satisfy their party's base of supporters on the one hand and policies that appeal to the political center and are more likely to win the broader based support necessary for steering legislation through Congress on the other hand, this balancing act was particularly difficult for President Bush. With the parties as polarized as they have ever been and so nearly equal in numbers in both the House and the Senate, President Bush was required to compromise to assemble a winning legislative coalition.

There were signs through the first half of his term, which suggested that he was doing just that. From the airport security issue (federalizing security personnel) to the education plan (dropping the voucher plan) to working through the United Nation on the Iraq situation (rather than going it alone from the start of the crisis) to his position on the University of Michigan affirmative action case (rather than denouncing all uses of race in admissions), there appeared to be some “give” in his positions. On the other hand, the president held to his conservative principles in his tax cut proposal, in rebalancing economic and environmental concerns, and in his judicial appointments. Along with questions regarding the president’s stewardship of the economy, whether conservatives found that there was too much “give” or whether moderates found there was too little in the president’s positions would seem to be the key questions for the 2004 election.

The horrendous events of September 11, 2001 and the continuing war against terrorism in Afghanistan and Iraq, however, intervened to change the political landscape dramatically. These events rallied Americans to the president’s side and were an important reason why Republicans gained ground on the Democrats in the 2002 midterm elections, an unusual feat for the presidential party.²⁴ While public support for the president eroded a bit with the passage of time and the heating up of the 2004 season, his approval ratings as the election year approached were in the upper 50 percent range. These positive ratings appeared closely linked to his handling of foreign policy.²⁵ The Bush presidency born in an electoral crisis will most probably be judged in the 2004 election substantially on how well it has handled the foreign policy crisis of the war against terrorism.²⁶

NOTES

1. For a blow-by-blow recounting of the events in the Florida dispute, see Correspondents of *New York Times*, *36 Days: The Complete Chronicle of the 2000 Presidential Election Crisis* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 2001).
2. For a comparison of the critical vote in the 2000 election to past elections see James E. Campbell, “The Curious and Close Presidential Campaign of 2000,” in William Crotty, ed., *America’s Choice 2000* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 2001), 116.
3. The election data are from John L. Moore, Jon P. Premesberger, and David R. Tarr (eds.), *Congressional Quarterly’s Guide to U.S. Elections*, 4th edition (Washington, DC: CQ Press, 2001), 688.
4. Portions of the analysis that follows also appear in my chapter on the 2000 campaign in William Crotty’s edited volume on the 2000 election. See, Campbell, “The Curious and Close Presidential Campaign of 2000,” 115–137.
5. Seven models forecasting the national two-party popular vote were presented at the 2000 American Political Science Association Meeting at the end of August, more than two months before election day. For the most part the models were those presented in James E. Campbell and James C. Garand, eds., *Before the Vote: Forecasting American National Elections* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2000). The models ranged in forecasts from a Gore vote of 52.8 percentage points to a Gore landslide of 60.3 percentage points. Since Gore actually received 50.3 percentage points of the national two-party vote, the errors ranged from 2.5 percentage points

- to 10 points. These forecasts were based largely on the relationship of public opinion and economic indicators and the vote in past elections. Postelection examinations of the strengths and weaknesses of the models were published in *PS: Political Science and Politics* (March 2001), 9–48 and in *American Politics Research* (May 2001), 275–328.
6. In the Gallup Poll conducted from October 25 to 28, just a bit over a week before election day, Clinton's approval rating stood at 57 percent. For comparison, this was three points higher than his rating when he was reelected in 1996 and about where Ronald Reagan's ratings stood in 1984 when he won reelection in a landslide over Democratic presidential candidate Walter Mondale.
 7. See, James E. Campbell, *The American Campaign: U.S. Presidential Campaigns and the National Vote* (College Station, TX: Texas A&M University Press, 2000), 108–110.
 8. For a full comparison of the second quarter growth rates see James E. Campbell, "The Referendum that Didn't Happen: The Forecasts of the 2000 Presidential Election," *PS: Political Science and Politics*, 34 (March 2001), 33–38.
 9. See, Campbell, *The American Campaign*, 129–130.
 10. After the election, in attempting to explain why Gore had not received more votes, some suggested that the economy was not as strong as many (including all of the political science forecasting models at the time) had believed. See Larry M. Bartels and John Zaller, "Presidential Vote Models: A Recount," *PS: Political Science and Politics* (March 2001), 9–20. They argue that the growth in real disposable income (RDI) per capita, as opposed to the growth in the real GDP per capita, was not strong in 2000 and that voters respond to RDI. The two measures usually march in tandem, but differed in 2000. The difference between the two reflected the increased taxes under the Clinton administration and the fact that more of the nation's economic output was being accumulated in the national government's surplus rather than voters' pockets. While plausible, Bartels and Zaller's account fails to account for why so many in the public rated the economy so positively right up to election day. The Gallup Poll indicated that 66% of Americans rated the economy as excellent or good in May of 2000. In July and August these positive assessments rose to 74% and in October they stood at 71%. These positive evaluations comport more with the strong GDP growth than the weaker RDI growth.
 11. There is an extensive literature on retrospective voting in general and retrospective economic voting in particular. See Morris P. Fiorina, *Retrospective Voting in American National Elections* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1981); Ray C. Fair, "The Effect of Economic Events on Votes for President: 1984 Update," *Political Behavior*, 10 (1988), 168–179; Robert S. Erikson, "Economic Conditions and the Presidential Vote," *American Political Science Review*, 83 (1989), 567–573.
 12. For a more thorough discussion of the realignment, and claims regarding partisan dealignment, see Campbell, *The American Campaign*, Appendix A, 207–218; James E. Campbell, *Cheap Seats: The Democratic Party's Advantage in U.S. House Elections* (Columbus, OH: Ohio State University Press, 1996), 162–168; and James E. Campbell, *The Presidential Pulse of Congressional Elections*, 2nd edition (Lexington, KY: University Press of Kentucky, 1997), 221–230. Also see, Bruce E. Keith, Bruce E., David B. Magleby, Candice J. Nelson, Elizabeth Orr, Mark C. Westlye, and Raymond E. Wolfinger, *The Myth of the Independent Voter* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992); Daniel Wirls,

- “Voting Behavior: The Balance of Power in American Politics,” in Michael Nelson, ed., *The Elections of 2000* (Washington, DC: CQ Press, 2001), 93–108; and Larry M. Bartels, “Partisanship and Voting Behavior, 1952–1996,” *American Journal of Political Science*, 44 (January 2000), 35–50.
13. It is interesting to note that some of the major themes and issues of the Gore and Bush campaigns were rarely mentioned as major problems by voters. Inequalities and class politics, a significant theme in the Gore campaign, and tax cuts, a significant issue for the Bush campaign, were not often mentioned by voters. It is also worth noting in light of the events of September 11, 2001 that only one respondent indicated that terrorism was the most important problem.
 14. For a discussion of the competitiveness effects of campaigns see, Campbell, *The American Campaign*, chapter 7 and Larry M. Bartels, “The Impact of Electioneering in the United States.” in David Butler and Austin Ranney, eds., *Electioneering: A Comparative Study of Continuity and Change* (Oxford: Clarendon Press 1992), 244–277. The partisan reinforcing effects of campaigns is examined in James E. Campbell, “Presidential Election Campaigns and Partisanship,” in Jeffrey E. Cohen, Richard Fleisher, and Paul Kantor, eds., *American Political Parties: Decline or Resurgence?* (Washington, DC: CQ Press, 2001), 11–29.
 15. Campbell, *The American Campaign*, 150.
 16. Harold W. Stanley, “The Nominations: The Return of the Party Leaders,” in Nelson, ed., *The Elections of 2000*, 29–32.
 17. Campbell, “The Curious and Close Presidential Campaign of 2000,” 124. See also, James E. Campbell, “Nomination Politics, Party Unity, and Presidential Elections,” in James Pfiffner and Roger H. Davidson, eds., *Understanding the Presidency*, 4th edition (New York: Longman, 2004).
 18. Katherine Q. Seelye, “Gore Rallies Base: Vice President Invokes Clinton Name During 19-Hour Swing,” the *New York Times*, November 6, 2000, A1 and A20.
 19. The data are from the NES and are calculated and reported in Paul R. Abramson, John H. Aldrich, and David W. Rohde, *Change and Continuity in the 2000 Elections* (Washington, DC: CQ Press, 2001), 159–163.
 20. The percentage of voters with positive views of past performance was, as expected, higher than average in 2000. The percentage of those thinking that the economy had gotten better was 39%, compared to a median from 1980 to 1996 of 19%. The percentage approving of the incumbent’s handling of the economy in 2000 was 77%, compared to a median from 1980 to 1996 of 54%. The percentage approving of the president in the NES survey was 67%, compared to a median from 1972 to 1996 of 63%. Gore’s yield in the percentage of votes from these approving voters was lower than any in-party candidate except Jimmy Carter on the general economy question and lower than any of the in-party candidates except Gerald Ford on the general approval question.
 21. Richard Nadeau and Michael S. Lewis-Beck, “National Economic Voting in U.S. Presidential Elections,” *The Journal of Politics*, 63:1 (January 2001), 159–181.
 22. James E. Campbell, “An Evaluation of the Trial-Heat and Economy Forecast of the Presidential Vote in the 2000 Election,” *American Politics Research*, 29:3 (May 2001), 289–296 and James E. Campbell, Syed Ali, and Farida Jalalzai, “Predicting the Presidential Vote in the States, 1948–2000: An Update and Revision of a State-Level Presidential Forecasting Model” presented at the Annual Meeting of the Southern Political Science Association, 2002.
 23. William Crotty, “Election by Judicial Fiat: The Courts Decide,” in William Crotty, ed., *America’s Choice 2000*, 36–78.

24. James E. Campbell, "The 2002 Midterm Election: A Typical or an Atypical Midterm?," *PS: Political Science and Politics*, 36:2 (April 2003), 203–207.
25. The Gallup Poll analysis of September 5, 2003 indicated that President Bush's approval stood at 59%, with 66% approving of his handling of terrorism, 57% approving of his handling of the "situation in Iraq," and 55% approving of his handling of foreign policy. The President's overall approval rating was more highly correlated with attitudes about foreign policy and the situation in Iraq than with evaluations of him on any other issue.
26. As this book was about to go press, the Bureau of Economic Analysis released revised measures of GDP growth. These revised measures indicated that the economy in 2000 was not quite as strong as previously indicated. In the two years leading up to the campaign, the economy grew at an annual rate of 4.2 percent rather than 4.6 percent. The economy in the second quarter of 2000 grew at a slightly stronger rate, but now ranked as the ninth strongest of the last 14 elections rather than the eleventh strongest (since several second quarters of earlier election years were also revised upward). Most notably, the economy in the third quarter of 2000 (July through September) actually was in decline (–.5 percent "growth") rather than experiencing modest growth (2.2 percent growth) as previously believed. In substantive terms, though the new measurement indicates that the economy may not have been as big an asset for the Gore campaign as previously believed, it nevertheless was a factor that should have predisposed voters in favor of a Gore vote.