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The Presidential Election of 2004: The Fundamentals and the Campaign

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Abstract

This article examines the 2004 presidential campaign by examining the trinity of fundamentals that have historically affected presidential elections and how they “played out” in this year’s campaign. The three fundamentals are public opinion about the in-party and candidates before the campaign gets underway, the state of the pre-campaign economy, and incumbency (both personal and party-term incumbency). They are assessed for elections since 1948 and in one case since 1868. The first two of these fundamentals slightly favored President Bush and the third (an incumbent seeking a second party-term) strongly favored him. The analysis considers how the fundamentals interplayed with voter assessments of candidate qualities, issues, and ideology to lead to the closely fought Bush re-election. After all is said and done, after considering the impact of the war on terror and in Iraq, the election turned out much as one would have expected based on candidates’ ideological positions. The 2004 election added another case to the string of presidential losses by liberal northern Democrats since 1968.

KEYWORDS: elections, presidency, political parties

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More than 122 million Americans voted in the 2004 presidential election, almost 17 million more than had cast ballots in the 2000 election.¹ Of the approximately 121 million voting for one of the major party candidates, 51.3 percent voted for President George W. Bush and 48.7 voted for his Democratic rival, Senator John Kerry.² President Bush carried 31 states and accumulated 286 electoral votes, making him only the 16th president in American history and only the 4th since 1960 to be elected to two terms in the White House. Republicans have now won seven of the last ten presidential elections.

Although the 2004 election was not as close as many had anticipated in the closing weeks of the campaign nor as close as the election of 2000, it nevertheless ranks in the top tier of closely decided elections in American electoral history. Of the 35 presidential elections since 1868, the 2004 election is one of only nine in which winning presidential candidate received less than 51.5 percent of the two-party vote (Campbell 2000, 165). In terms of the electoral vote margin, the 2004 election ranks as the 4th closest since 1868. In the twentieth century, only Woodrow Wilson's 1916 victory over Charles Evans Hughes and the Bush's contentious victory in 2000 over Al Gore were decided by smaller electoral vote margins. Each of these three elections turned on the electoral votes of a single, closely decided state.³ The purpose of this paper is to explore some of the reasons why George W. Bush won his bid for re-election.

The answer to the question of why the 2004 election turned out as it did must begin with the defining feature of recent American politics: its polarization. The electorate's polarization set an important backdrop to the 2004 campaign. There are many reasons for this polarization. The first is the realignment that began in the late 1950s and culminated in the Republican majority in the U.S. House of Representatives in 1994. As Carmines and Stimson (1989) demonstrated some time ago, the collapse of the racial issue into the traditional government activism issue set a domino effect in motion. The Democratic Party became more homogeneously liberal and the Republican Party became more homogeneously conservative. The realignment is most clearly evident in the evolution of our political geography in which Northeastern states have become solidly Democratic and the "Solid South" is now solidly Republican. This realignment set the parties near parity in party identification, adding further fuel to polarization. Among voters, there are now nearly as many self-identified Republicans as there are self-identified Democrats. Partisanship is resurgent (Bartels 2000; Campbell 2000, 216). Among voters in the 2000 election, there were nearly as many strong partisans as there had been in the 1950s, the golden-era of partisanship (Campbell 2000, 211). Adding to polarization in 2004 was the vivid memory of the 2000 election. Adherents to both parties thought that the other side had attempted to steal the election. Finally, the war in Iraq heightened polarization. As the war continued and casualties mounted, conflicting views about the war overshadowed the short-lived bipartisanship following Al Qaeda's attacks on September 11, 2001 and the international efforts to hunt down terrorists. Polarization now permeates our politics, including the bitterly fought election campaign of 2004.

The Fundamentals in 2004

This analysis of the 2004 election examines three of the fundamentals that have historically shaped campaigns and how public reactions to the candidates and the issues, in the context of these fundamentals, led to President Bush's re-election. Experience with presidential forecasting models suggests three sets of pre-campaign fundamentals that are important to setting the context for presidential elections (Campbell 2000, 2005a). Using the analogy of a card game, the fundamentals are the cards dealt to the candidates. In this game, each side knows what cards the other holds—so while it is possible for either side to misplay its cards (to fritter away its advantages (see, Al Gore)), in general the candidate dealt the stronger hand wins the game. The three fundamentals are the public's opinion about the candidates at the outset of the campaign, the growth in the election-year economy, and incumbency (both personal and the number of terms that a party has occupied the White House). The candidates who have the stronger hand are those who are highly regarded by the public at the outset, in-party candidates running when the election-year economy is strong and out-party candidates running when the election-year economy is weak, and incumbents who are seeking a second consecutive term in the White House for their party. To varying degrees, all three of these fundamentals favored President Bush in 2004.

Pre-Campaign Public Opinion

At the outset of the general election campaign, in the period surrounding the national conventions in July until the first week of September, public opinion about the re-election of President Bush was divided but tilted slightly in his favor. Table 1 displays the vote and the two best indicators of the public's pre-campaign predisposition about the election: the approval rating of the president in July and the in-party share of preferences among registered voters at Labor Day for the 15 elections from 1948 to 2004. Both sets of poll numbers are from The Gallup Organization and the national popular vote is calculated from data in *Congressional Quarterly's Guide to U.S. Elections* (2001, 675-88) and Leip (2004).⁴ Both opinion measures are strong precursors of the vote several months later, having correlations with the vote of .82 and .86. The table orders the 15 elections from 1948 to 2004 by each of these indicators from the most to least positive for the in-party candidate, along with the corresponding election results. The gap in each listing indicates when public opinion appears to cross over from indicating a popular vote win to a loss. The cut-point for July approval is set at 46 percent (though a linear regression suggests an even lower threshold) and the cut-point for the Labor Day preference is set at 50 percent.

As the table indicates, by both measures of public opinion, the re-election of President Bush sat at the cusp of the favorable numbers. President Bush's approval rating in July was 47 percent. Seven of the eight in-party candidates who had enjoyed higher approval at this point had won their election. The only one to fall short lost in an extremely close race (Nixon in 1960). Five of the six in-party candidates whose incumbents had lower approval ratings in July lost their election. The only survivor was Harry Truman who, with the help of a booming second quarter

economy, reassembled the splintered majority New Deal coalition just in time to fend off Thomas Dewey.

The Labor Day preference polls tell the same story: on the eve of the campaign, the public was closely divided, but with perhaps a slight tilt to Bush. All seven in-party candidates that stood at 51 percent or higher in the polls at Labor Day had won the popular vote in November. With the exception of Truman in 1948, every in-party candidate who had 49 percent or less of support at Labor Day had lost the popular vote on election day. The regression of the poll against the vote indicated that the critical threshold for an in-party candidate to reach an expected 50 percent of the vote was short of 50 percent in the polls, so Bush's 50.5 percent appeared to set his candidacy just on the positive side of the line.

Table 1. Pre-Campaign Public Opinion and the In-Party Vote, 1948-2004

Presidential Approval in July			Labor Day Preference for In-Party Candidate		
Year	Approval Rating %	In-Party Vote (two-party %)	Year	In-Party % in Poll at Labor Day	In-Party Vote (two-party %)
1964	74	61.3	1964	69.2	61.3
1956	69	57.8	1972	62.9	61.8
2000	59	50.3	1996	60.7	54.7
1996	57	54.7	1984	60.2	59.2
1972	56	61.8	1956	55.9	57.8
1984	52	59.2	1988	54.4	53.9
1988	51	53.9	2000	52.1	50.3
1960	49	49.9	1960	50.5	49.9
2004	47	51.3	2004	50.5	51.3
1976	45	49.0	1980	48.7	44.7
1968	40	49.6	1948	45.6	52.3
1948	39	52.3	1952	42.1	44.6
1952	32	44.6	1992	41.9	46.5
1992	31	46.5	1968	41.9	49.6
1980	21	44.7	1976	40.0	49.0
In-Party Won	Below 46%	Above 46%		Below 50%	Above 50%
Lost	1	8		1	8
	5	1		5	1
Correlation with Vote	.82		.86		

Note: Win and loss refer to achieving a majority of the popular two-party vote. The poll data are from Gallup surveys. The Labor Day preference polls are the two-party division of registered voters. Based on the bivariate linear regression, the estimated tipping point for 50 percent of the two-party vote is 40.5 percent of July approval and 47.3 percent of the Labor Day preference poll.

Why was pre-campaign opinion so divided with a slight tilt to Bush? The polarization of the electorate, of course, had a great deal to do with the near-even division of pre-campaign opinion. While opinion was somewhat divided and very intense regarding the war on terror and the war in Iraq (issues that Democrats separated, but Republicans regarded as part and parcel of the same issue), on balance, President Bush was favored on the issue. A Gallup Poll in late August (23-25) indicated that Bush was favored over Kerry on handling terrorism by a margin of 54 to 37 percent and on “the situation in Iraq” by a margin of 49 to 43 percent (Gallup 2004c). Bush’s political perspectives were also consistently viewed by more voters as being more ideologically acceptable than Kerry’s (2004j). Some of this advantage was offset by the slight lead that Kerry had over Bush on many domestic issues (the economy, healthcare, social security, the environment), but these were not matters of central concern to most voters in this election.

The parties’ nominating conventions may have also contributed to Bush’s slight lead going into the fall campaign. Conventions provide candidates an opportunity to reunite their party after intra-party conflicts over nominations and to set forth their message for why the larger audience of the general electorate should vote for them. As a consequence of the party holding the national “floor” for a week during its convention, the candidate typically emerges with an increased amount of support in the polls, a convention bump. Candidates have received positive convention bumps in 18 of the 20 national conventions between 1964 and 2000 (Campbell 2000, 145-51). Only Lyndon Johnson who was already sky-high in the polls in 1964 and George McGovern who had a divisive convention in 1972 had failed to receive a convention bump. The Democrats had even received a bump from their disastrous 1968 convention in Chicago. Typically, a candidate receives a bump of about 6 or 7 percentage points and the out-party averages closer to a 9 point bump. While the Republican convention in 2004 only bumped Bush’s preferences up by about one point (according to registered voters in Gallup and 3 or 4 points in other polls), Senator Kerry actually appeared to have received no bump or to have lost ground during the Democratic convention. Although some polls showed a very slight bump for Kerry, the preference polls generally indicated a slight lead for Kerry before the conventions and a slight lead for Bush after the conventions.⁵

Why did Senator Kerry receive either no bump or a very slight one from the Democratic convention? Polarization constrained any poll movement.⁶ Most Democrats were already strongly united behind Kerry. Once the Howard Dean campaign imploded in Iowa, Democrats flocked to Kerry as the “Anybody But Bush,” unite-the-party candidate. Kerry also had announced his vice presidential selection of nomination rival Senator John Edwards several weeks before the convention and thus may have already received whatever bump he would get from this. Beyond these factors, however, was the content of the Democratic Convention. The core message of the convention had been about Kerry’s war record in Vietnam (see Thomas, et. al. 2004, 80-1). This was encapsulated in Kerry’s salute while reading the opening line of his nomination acceptance speech: “I’m John Kerry, and I’m reporting for duty.” While this message may have been intended to neutralize the foreign policy advantage of a Republican incumbent and dissuade voters that Democrats were soft or irresponsible on foreign policy, it may also have been a lost opportunity to present a compelling reason to voters to cast their

ballots for Kerry over Bush. Voters may well have walked away from the Democratic Convention thinking that it was terrific that Kerry was a war-hero more than thirty years ago, but that this was not much of a reason to elect him president. The “Swift-Boat” ads run by veterans opposed to Kerry (particularly his Vietnam war protest activities) and challenging accounts of his heroism, along with the controversy that surrounded the issue, made the decision to focus the convention on Kerry’s Vietnam War record all the more questionable.⁷

The State of the Economy Leading Into the Campaign

The second fundamental is the economy leading into the election and especially the amount of economic growth in the months preceding the fall campaign. The extent of economic growth is important to voters in a direct and tangible sense, but is also important to establishing the electorate’s receptivity to the in-party (on non-economic issues as well as on economic matters). When the economy is doing well, voters should be looking for reasons to continue the in-party’s tenure. When the economy is not doing well, they may be receptive to calls for ending that tenure. The election-year economy is a good barometer of the mood that voters are likely to be in during the fall campaign (Campbell 2000a, 126-39).

Despite much of the rhetoric of the campaign, the economy tilted in favor of President Bush’s re-election in 2004. Although Democrats hammered on the lack of job creation and the slow recovery from the recession in the first years of the Bush term, the real economic growth in the last two years of the Bush term and in the election-year itself would appear to have been an asset.

Table 2 presents a comparison of broad-based objective and subjective economic indicators well before the fall campaign for 2004 and the previous three presidential elections. The table includes the annual growth rate in the Gross Domestic Product for the two years leading into the campaign (U.S. Bureau of Economic Analysis, 2004), the percentage of Gallup Poll respondents in the spring of the election year indicating that they thought the economy was in excellent or good shape, and (more broadly) the percentage of respondents who were satisfied “with the way things are going in the United States” (Gallup 2004d, 2004e). The pattern of the three indicators is consistent across the years. Public satisfaction and recent economic growth was greater in 2000 than in either 1996 or 1992, greater in 1996 than in 1992, and 2004 looks more like 1996 than either the boom leading into 2000 or the sluggish economy leading into 1992. The circumstances leading into 1992 contributed to the elder President Bush’s defeat. The circumstances leading into 1996 contributed to President Clinton’s re-election and it is commonly conceded that the circumstances of 2000 were to Al Gore’s advantage. In short, a very early reading of the economy suggests that it should have been a political asset for President Bush.

Table 2. Economic Conditions Leading into the Presidential Campaigns, 1992-2004

Pre-Campaign Indicators of National Economy	Elections			
	1992	1996	2000	2004
Average Economic Growth Rate in Previous Two Years (GDP through first quarter of the election year, annualized)	.8%	2.9%	4.2%	3.5%
Rate Economic Conditions as Excellent or Good (April or May)	12%	30%	66%	29%
Satisfied with "the way things are going in the United States" (May)	20%	37%	55%	37%

Sources: Gallup (2004d, 2004e) and the U.S. Bureau of Economic Analysis (2004). The economic conditions poll dates are 4/9-12/1992, 5/9-12/1996, 5/18-21/2000, and 5/2-4/2004. The satisfied with the way things are going poll dates are 5/7-10/1992, 5/9-12/1996, 5/18-21/2000, and 5/7-9/2004. The average economic growth rate in the GDP is the annual rate of growth in the "chained" 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. The computation was half of [(GDP quarter 1 in Year 4 - GDP quarter 1 in Year 2)/GDP quarter in Year 2].

The 2004 election-year economy itself, at least as measured by growth in the real GDP, is set in historical relief in Table 3. Elections from 1948 to 2004 are ordered by the extent of real GDP growth in the first half of the election year (January to June) and in the second quarter (April to June). The data are from the U.S. Bureau of Economic Analysis (2004) and the growth rates have been annualized. Economic growth in both series is strongly correlated with the November vote (.51 and .60), but not as strongly associated with the vote as is either indicator of pre-campaign opinion. Each series is broken into three groups: those with growth rates in excess of 4 percent, those with growth between 2.5 and 4 percent, and those with growth rates slower than 2.5 percent. These might be thought of respectively as "great," "pretty good," and "not so good" economic conditions. In-party candidates who have run with growth rates over 4 percent have usually won and the elections they have lost have been close. Humphrey in 1968 and Ford in 1976 ran with the economy growing at a rate of 6 percent or stronger in the first half of the election year, but narrowly lost their elections. These booms were not enough to save Humphrey from the splintering of his division-wracked party nor could they save Ford from the fallout of Watergate and his pardon of President Nixon. At the other end of the spectrum, candidates running with sub-2.5 percent economies have usually lost. The only candidate to survive the

pattern was Eisenhower in 1956 and the economy that year was rebounding by the second quarter.

Table 3. Election-year Economies and the In-Party Vote, 1948-2004

First Half Year GDP Growth				Second-Quarter GDP Growth			
Year	GDP Growth %	In-Party Vote (Two-Party %)		Year	GDP Growth %	In-Party Vote (Two-Party %)	
1972	8.4	61.8		1972	9.4	61.8	
1968	7.6	49.8		1948	7.1	52.3	
1984	7.4	59.2		1984	6.9	59.2	
1964	6.9	61.3		1968	6.8	49.6	
1948	6.8	52.3		2000	6.3	50.3	
1976	6.0	49.0		1988	5.1	53.9	
				1964	4.7	61.3	
1992	4.0	46.5		1992	3.9	46.5	
2004	3.9	51.3		2004	3.3	51.3	
2000	3.7	50.3		1956	3.2	57.8	
1988	3.5	53.9		1976	3.0	49.0	
1960	3.4	49.9		1996	2.8	54.7	
1996	2.9	54.7					
1952	2.2	44.6		1952	.3	44.6	
1956	.6	57.8		1960	-2.0	49.9	
1980	-3.4	44.7		1980	-8.1	44.7	
In-Party Won	2.5%-	2.5 to 4%	4%+	2.5%-	2.5 to 4%	4%+	
Lost	1	4	4	0	3	6	
	2	2	2	3	2	1	
Correlation with Vote	.51			.60			

Note: Win and loss refer to achieving a majority of the popular two-party vote. The gross domestic product (GDP) economic data are annualized and obtained from the Bureau of Economic Analysis. Based on the bivariate linear regression, the estimated tipping point for 50 percent of the two-party vote is 1.60 percent growth in the first half of the year and only .33 percent in the second quarter.

By either measure of the election-year economy's performance, the economy in the months leading up to the campaign were in the "pretty good" category. It ranks eighth or ninth out of the 15 election years. This is at or close to the median case in this period and the median election-year economy has generally been strong enough to help elect the in-party candidate. That said, it is interesting to observe the limits to effects of the election-year economy. While economic growth in the first part of 2004 was stronger than it had been when Bill Clinton was re-elected in

1996, it was not quite as strong as it had been in 1992 when the President's father had been defeated by Clinton. The elder Bush did not lose because of the election-year economy. The damage had been done earlier and is reflected in the economic numbers in Table 2 and the poll numbers in Table 1.

The limits of economic effects also could be observed in the issue polls conducted during the campaign. Despite objective economic indicators tilting in President Bush's favor, the economy as an issue worked to Senator Kerry's advantage. In five separate polls conducted in October by Gallup (2004c), respondents favored Kerry over Bush in dealing with the economy by an average margin of 51 to 44 percent. Eight polls by ABC News (2004) conducted in October also indicated that Kerry held, on average, a 48 to 46 advantage over Bush regarding who likely voters thought would do a better job handling the economy. *The Los Angeles Times* exit poll found that nearly half of Kerry voters said that the economy was the most important problem while fewer than one in five Bush voters had the economy at the top of their concerns (PollingReport.com, 2004b). Finally, the exit polls indicated that Kerry received 80 percent of the votes of those who thought that the economy (and jobs) was the most important issue in the election (CNN 2004).⁸

Why did the economy as an issue favor Kerry when the broad-based economic measures indicated that it should have helped Bush? The answer may be that the Bush campaign decided early on that the strongest message for the President's re-election concerned his leadership in the war against terrorism. With the Bush campaign staying on the anti-terrorism message, the Kerry campaign was allowed to frame the economic issue as a jobs creation issue, the terms most favorable to Kerry. Once framed in this way, President Bush was on the defensive on the issue. So despite respectable (albeit not glowing) economic numbers, the economy as an issue was owned by Kerry this year. The economy as an issue was expendable to the Bush campaign since it could be largely neutralized and ultimately trumped by the terrorism issue.

Incumbency and the Party-Term

The third in the trinity of fundamentals is incumbency, both personal and party-term (Campbell 2000a, 101-25; 2000b, 178-81). The advantages of personal presidential incumbency, from the risk aversion of voters to agenda-setting to the "Rose Garden" strategy to greater intra-party unity are well established. As Presidents Ford, Carter, and Bush the elder's failed campaigns demonstrate, these advantages are no guarantee of reelection. Nevertheless, it is clear that incumbency is a substantial asset to presidential candidates. Under the worst of circumstances, presidents as candidates are never trounced at the polls. Even President Carter who ran with a foreign policy debacle, a terrible economic mess, and a divided party garnered about 45 percent of the vote. Incumbents seeking simply a second term for their party in the White House are particularly advantaged (Abramowitz 2000, Norpoth 2000). Whether it is their greater party unity or the ability to be viewed simultaneously as both an experienced Washington insider offering stability and a political newcomer/outside pushing for change, incumbents seeking a second party-term historically have an enviable track-record.

Table 4 presents the track-record on incumbency and party-terms for the 35 presidential elections from 1868 to 2004. The elections are grouped into those in which the in-party candidate was not an incumbent, those in which the in-party candidate was an incumbent and was seeking to extend his party's tenure in the presidency beyond a second term, and those in which the in-party candidate was an incumbent seeking a second presidential term for his party. Both the win-loss and the median vote statistics tell the same story. In-party candidates who are not incumbents or who are incumbents seeking more than a second term for their party are at neither a competitive advantage nor a disadvantage. Their median votes and won-loss records are near 50-50. Incumbents seeking a second term for their party, however, have a record suggesting that they are running with a considerable advantage. Of the 13 cases that fit this description since 1868, the incumbent has won on all but two occasions.⁹ Their median two-party vote is nearly 55 percent. In the seven such cases since 1948, the median two-party vote for these incumbents has been a remarkable 57.8 percent. Eisenhower in 1956, Johnson in 1964, Nixon in 1972, Reagan in 1984 were all second party-term incumbents who won in landslides or near-landslides. Clinton in 1996 won with a fairly safe margin. Carter in 1980 is the outlier.

Table 4. Incumbency, the Party-Term and the Vote, 1868-2004

	In-Party Non-Incumbents	Incumbents Seeking Beyond a Second Party-Term	Incumbents Seeking a Second Party-Term
Median Vote %	49.9	52.3	54.7
Won	6	5	11
Lost	7	4	2

Note: N=35. Win and loss refer to achieving a majority of the popular two-party vote. A regression analysis indicates that seeking more than a second term for a party costs the candidate 5.1 percent of the two-party vote ($p < .02$, one-tailed). The expected vote of seeking a second term is 55.0 percent and the expected vote of seeking more than a second term is 49.9 percent. The three losing incumbents who were only seeking a second party-term were Benjamin Harrison in 1892 and Jimmy Carter in 1980. Since 1948, the median vote percentages are 49.9 (N=5) for non-incumbents, 48.9 (N=3) for incumbents seeking more than a second party-term, and 57.8 (N=7) for incumbents seeking a second party-term.

As an incumbent seeking a second party-term for the Republicans, President Bush enjoyed a considerable advantage. The question that arises here is why President Bush did not receive the large majority of other second party-term presidents? Three reasons seem most plausible. First, with the nation as polarized as it is, Democrats were much more united than an out-party would normally be for a first party-term president. Many Democrats loathed President Bush. Perhaps the most tangible evidence of this is the speed with which Democrats abandoned nomination frontrunner Howard Dean for Senator Kerry. Which Democrat received the nomination was not as important to these voters as nominating someone who could defeat President Bush. Poll after poll following the Iowa caucus indicated that Kerry was the runaway choice of those Democrats

deciding how to vote in the primaries and caucuses based on the candidate's ability to win in November (Gallup 2004f). Normally, a party out of the White House for just four years would still be engaged in internal struggles for control of the party.¹⁰ They may even think that the election of the opposition had been a fluke, a one-termer, who could be easily beaten in the next contest. This is not so clearly the case with polarized politics.

The second reason for the close election of a second party-term incumbent was the war in Iraq. While the President received high marks from voters for his decisiveness and strength of leadership, the war probably made the election closer than it would have been otherwise. While voters in various pre-election polls and the exit polls favored Bush over Kerry on the war against terrorism, they were more evenly divided about Iraq. In the October Gallup Polls, Bush was favored over Kerry on the war against terrorism by an average margin of 56 to 40 percent (Gallup 2004c). Among exit poll respondents who said that terrorism was the most important issue, Bush won 86 percent of their votes (CNN 2004). Regarding the war in Iraq, on the other hand, Bush's lead over Kerry in the October Gallup Polls was a more narrow 51 to 46 percent margin. In the exit polls, among the 52 percent who thought that "things were going badly for U.S. in Iraq," Kerry received 82 percent of their votes. Kerry might have done even better by this issue if his position on it had been less nuanced and more stable. As it stood, Kerry won the votes almost by default of those of various stripes who were dissatisfied with Bush's Iraq policy.

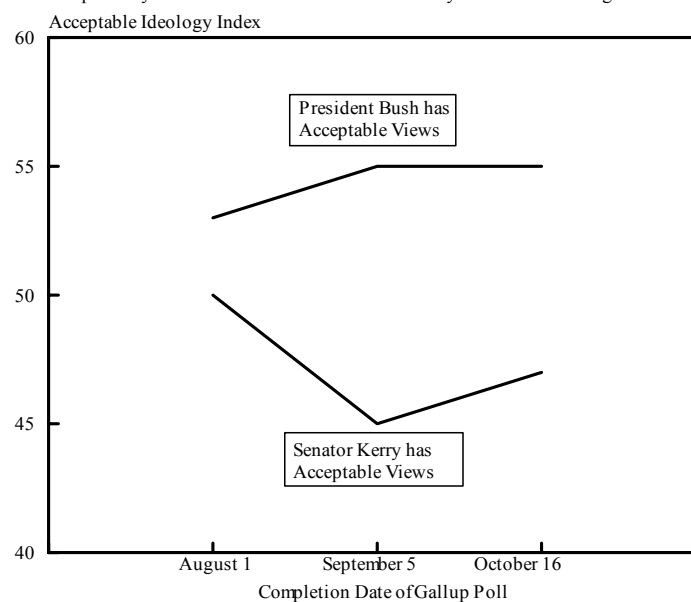
The debates may have been a third reason that the Bush margin was less than might have been expected for a second party-term incumbent. Before the first debate on the last day of September, Kerry trailed Bush in the Gallup Poll by 43 to 57 among registered voters (Gallup 2004a). Two weeks later after the third debate on October 13, the margin had been reduced to a Bush lead of 52 to 48 for Kerry. The Pew Research Center Poll had the pre-debate margin at 55 to 45 for Bush and the candidates in a tie after the debates (PollingReport.com 2004a). *The Los Angeles Times* poll similarly had Bush ahead by 52 to 48 before the debates and the two candidates tied in their post-debates poll (PollingReport.com 2004a). In each of the three debates, Gallup respondents were much more likely to say that their views of Kerry had become more favorable than their views of Bush (Gallup 2004g, 2004h, 2004i). The biggest difference was in the first debate in which respondents were more than twice as likely to have been impressed by Kerry than Bush. While much of this effect was probably ephemeral, it seems likely that some also survived to the election. Kerry had established his credibility with many voters. While Kerry was on-the-ropes before the debates, the race was tight in the weeks the followed.

The Moral of the Story

The fundamentals in the 2004 election established a setting favorable to the reelection of President Bush. The public was pre-disposed, if only slightly, to his re-election. The economy was favorable, if again, only slightly. And the fact that the President was seeking a second term for the Republicans after the eight years of the Clinton presidency also was conducive to a Bush victory. The polarized electorate, divisions over the war in Iraq, and the vehemence with which Democrats wanted Bush out set the stage for a closer election.

In the end, with considerations of how polarization and the Iraq war made the election tighter, the election turned out not much different than one might have expected if you looked at the match-up from a longer perspective: an election between a sitting conservative Republican president from the south against a northeastern liberal Senator. Figure 1 tells the story. It plots an index of ideological acceptability over three Gallup Polls conducted from early August, early September (the kickoff of the general election campaign), and mid-October (Gallup 2004j). The index is the percentage of respondents who thought that the political views of the candidates were just about right or maybe not far enough removed from the other party. Was Senator Kerry too liberal for voters or was President Bush too conservative? The answer about what voters thought is clear: many more thought that Senator Kerry was too liberal than thought that President Bush was too conservative.¹¹ In the August poll, half of the respondents thought that Kerry's political views were about right or even too conservative, but 44 percent thought that they were too liberal. In the same poll, 53 percent thought President Bush's views were about right or even too liberal and 41 percent thought that they were too conservative. In the September and October polls, more respondents found Senator Kerry's views to be unacceptably liberal than to be acceptably mainstream or conservative. In contrast, in each of the surveys, between 53 and 55 percent found President Bush's views to be acceptable and only 40 or 41 percent thought

Figure 1. Acceptability of President Bush's and Senator Kerry's Political Ideologies



Note: The data are from Gallup Polls. Acceptable ideology is calculated with reference to each candidate's ideological position. For President Bush it is the percentage of respondents who said that his political views were "about right" or "too liberal." For Senator Kerry it is the percentage of respondents who said his views were "about right" or "too conservative."

them too conservative.¹² In short, the results of 2004 would appear to once again confirm the conventional wisdom that northern Democratic liberals (Humphrey, McGovern, Mondale, Dukakis, and now Kerry) are too far out of sync with the views of America's median voter to be elected president.¹³

While there is no doubt that voters mean some different things when they respond to the liberal and conservative labels, there is also no doubt that there is meaning there. In five September and October Gallup polls, respondents consistently named President Bush more often as the candidate who "shares your values." Though the margins were smaller than on the ideology question (+2 to +5 Bush), the gap was consistent. The exit polls also indicated that while Kerry received 85% of the liberal vote, Bush received 84% of the conservative vote (CNN 2004). The difference is that conservatives greatly outnumber liberals. In the exit polls the ratio was 1.6 conservatives for every one liberal.

In the aftermath of the 2004 vote, analysts expressed surprise at responses to "the most important issue" question: more voters mentioned "moral values" as the most important issue than mentioned terrorism, or Iraq, or the economy. In the exit poll, 22 percent mentioned "moral values" as their greatest concern and Bush received four out of five of these votes (CNN 2004). Some interpreted this as an outpouring of the evangelical vote. Undoubtedly this was a portion of the vote. Bush won 78 percent of the votes of those who said that they were evangelicals or born-again. However, the surge in turnout may more properly be interpreted as a broader phenomenon of a mobilized conservative majority rallying to the side of a conservative President under siege.¹⁴

Did the campaign in 2004 make a difference? Quite probably. On one side, as already noted, Senator Kerry gained some ground through the debates. Most of these gains both in impressions of Kerry's stature and of his ability to handle the War in Iraq were temporary, but some appeared to have lasted. The ability to work the economic issue to his favor also benefited Senator Kerry. Offsetting these effects, at least in part, was the carefully coordinated Republican GOTV effort, an effort augmented by the drawing power in eleven states of referenda banning gay marriages. Conservatives were mobilized and stood the conventional wisdom that high turnout elections helped Democrats on its head.¹⁵ The *net* result of the unanticipated events of the campaign probably helped Senator Kerry, but probably not by more than about one percentage point of the vote.¹⁶

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Notes

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1. The estimated turnout in 2004 as a percentage of the voting age population is 56.1 percent. This was a 15.9 percent increase in the number of voters over the 2000 election (Leip 2004). This is the greatest percentage increase in turnout since 1952, surpassing the 14.0 percent increase in the 1992 election in which the Perot candidacy temporarily stimulated a higher turnout. The greatest percentage change in turnout in actual votes during the twentieth century was a 44.3 percent increase in the 1920 election, the first election in which women nationally were accorded the right to vote. Turnout from 1916 to 1920 increased from about 18.5 million voters to about 26.8 million.
 2. These figures are based on the unofficial vote count as of December 15, 2004. See, Leip 2004.
 3. The election deciding state was California in 1916, Florida in 2000, and Ohio in 2004.
 4. The approval numbers from 1948 to 2000 have been gathered from various Gallup Poll releases over the years. The 2004 number is from the July 8-11 poll by Gallup (2004b). The preference or trial-heat numbers for elections from 1948 to 1992 were obtained from Gallup. The 1996 and 2000 numbers were calculated from "General Election Tracking Polls" available on the Gallup Poll website. The 2004 number is from Gallup (2004a). The preference poll numbers are of registered (not "likely") voters.
 5. While there is concern about relying on a single polling organization, James Stimson's pooled data on the preference polls corroborates the Gallup picture in this regard. According to Stimson's pooled data, Kerry dropped from 51.8 percent in the July 25 pre-convention polls to 50.5 percent in the July 30 post-convention polls. Although the Washington Post poll showed a 4 point gain for Kerry after the convention, the Pew Research Center and NBC/Wall Street Journal polls separately show essentially no change from before to after the Democratic convention, the Zogby poll showed about a one point decline, the CBS poll showed less than a one point gain, and the Fox News poll showed about a 1.5 point gain (PollingReport.com 2004). With this variance, a real increase in Kerry's poll standing after the convention is possible, it is probably also safe to conclude that whatever increase might have occurred was small and probably smaller than the slight bump Bush received from the Republican convention. Both CBS and Zogby data separately indicate a 4 point bump for Bush from the GOP convention and the Washington Post poll showed a 3 point gain.
 6. The declining coverage of conventions by the broadcast networks and the expansion of cable network entertainment alternatives to the conventions may also have diminished the magnitude of convention bumps.
 7. According to Newsweek's coverage of the campaign, this point had been made later in the campaign to Senator Kerry by former President Clinton. Clinton advised Senator Kerry in early September to "spend less time talking about Vietnam and more time engaging on Iraq (Thomas et. al. 2004, 102)."
 8. One fifth of all voters, according to the exit poll, rated the economy as their top concern. There is also some evidence that the economy did not favor Kerry. The exit polls also indicated that Bush received 87% of the votes of voters who believed that the economy was excellent or good and that more voters said that they trusted Bush to handle the economy (49%) than Kerry (45%).
Nevertheless, the bulk of the evidence suggests that the economy as an issue cut in Kerry's favor.
 9. The two incumbents seeking a second party-term who lost are Benjamin Harrison who lost to Grover Cleveland in 1892 and Jimmy Carter who lost to Ronald Reagan in 1980.
 10. Elsewhere (Campbell 2005c, 80-81) I have presented evidence of greater early internal party unity for incumbents, especially those seeking a second party-term. While there were early outward signs of Democratic Party unity behind Kerry in 2004, the exit polls indicated that the Republicans were more unified than the Democrats. The defection rate for Democrats was only 11 percent, but it was only 6 percent among Republicans (CNN 2004). The exit poll also indicated that there were as many Republicans in the 2004 electorate as Democrats, though the poll did not measure partisan "leaners."
 11. About 12 to 14 percent found Bush to be too liberal for their tastes. Only 8 or 9 percent found Kerry to be too conservative. Since the survey respondents are anonymous, we cannot determine whether Michael Moore, Whoopi Goldberg, and Howard Dean are among these 8 or 9 percent.
 12. Apparently a majority of voters disagree with conclusions of Clinton, Jackman, and Rivers (2004). Their

analysis of Senate roll call voting concluded that President Bush was more conservative than Senator Kerry was liberal. They concluded that their “best guess is that Bush is more conservative than the entire Senate (p.809).” If this were true, and it strains credibility on its face, it would seem peculiar that President Bush did not veto any piece of major legislation during his first term.

13. The point that the ideological differences between the candidates were important to the election’s outcome should not be construed to mean that voter assessments of candidates on the issues and on various dimensions of leadership qualities were not also important. They may well have had an independent impact on the vote and ideological assessments may also have affected what voters thought of the candidates and the issues.

14. One piece of evidence that suggests that the “moral values” reason for many Bush votes extends beyond religion is that though Bush received the votes of 91% of exit poll respondents who said that “religious faith” was the most important quality in a candidate, only 8 percent of respondents named this quality as most important (CNN 2004).

15. The belief that Democrats routinely benefit from high turnout has somehow managed to survive masses of counter-evidence. It is based on the well-established relationships between socio-demographic factors, partisanship, and turnout. However, what is most important about non-voters is not their socio-demographic similarity to voting Democrats, but that they are politically distinct from either voting Democrats or voting Republicans and that there are not simply two kinds of citizens (voters and non-voters) but at least three (voters, non-voters who might conceivably vote, and those who could not be dragged to the polls).

16. My forecast model of the vote, using the Gallup Poll’s division of registered voters rather than likely voters, indicated that President Bush should have received about 52.3 percent of the two-party vote (Campbell 2005b). This is about one percentage point more than his actual vote.