

Why Bush Won the Presidential Election of 2004: Incumbency, Ideology, Terrorism, and Turnout

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More than 122 million Americans voted in the 2004 presidential election, nearly 17 million more than in 2000. This was a 16 percent increase in the total vote, the largest percentage increase in turnout since 1952.¹ Of the more than 121 million who voted for a major-party candidate, 51.2 percent voted for President George W. Bush and 48.8 percent voted for his Democratic rival, Senator John Kerry. President Bush carried thirty-one states and accumulated 286 electoral votes, making him only the sixteenth president in American history to be elected to two terms in the White House—and only the fourth since 1960. Republicans have now won seven of the last ten presidential elections.

Although the 2004 election was not as close as many observers had anticipated in the last weeks of the campaign nor as close as the election of 2000, it nonetheless ranks in the top tier of narrowly decided presidential elections. Of the thirty-five presidential contests since 1868, the 2004 election is one of only nine in which the winning presidential candidate received less than 51.5 percent of the two-party popular vote.² President Bush received the narrowest popular

¹ The estimated turnout in 2004 as a percentage of the voting age population was 56.2 percent, according to Dave Leip, “Dave Leip’s Atlas of U.S. Presidential Elections,” accessed at <http://uselectionatlas.org/>, (26 January 2005). This was 60 percent of the voting eligible population according to Michael P. McDonald, “Up, Up, and Away! Voter Participation in the 2004 Presidential Election,” *The Forum: A Journal of Applied Research in Contemporary Politics*, (December 2004) Vol. 2: No. 4, Article 4, accessed at <http://www.bepress.com/forum/vol2/iss4/art4>, 6 January 2005.

² James E. Campbell, *The American Campaign: U.S. Presidential Campaigns and the National Vote* (College Station, TX: Texas A&M University Press, 2000), 165. Of the nine “near dead-heat elections,” the 2004 election ranked ninth or was not as close as the other eight.

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vote margin of any of the twenty-two incumbents who won reelection during this period (although seven lost their bids) and fell 2 percentage points short of the average vote for an incumbent. In terms of the electoral vote margin, the 2004 election ranks as the fourth closest since 1868. In the twentieth century, only Woodrow Wilson's 1916 victory over Charles Evans Hughes and Bush's contentious victory in 2000 over Al Gore were decided by smaller electoral vote margins. Each of these three elections turned on the outcome in a single, closely decided state.³

What explains the election's outcome? This general question subsumes two interrelated sub-questions. First, why did a majority of American voters decide to reelect President Bush rather than elect Senator John Kerry? Second, why was the election between Bush and Kerry as close as it was? The answers to these questions require an examination of both the fundamental conditions that set the context for the election (the long-term influences on the vote) and the developments of the campaign itself (the short-term influences).

Experience with presidential forecasting models suggests three sets of pre-campaign fundamentals that are important to setting the context for presidential elections.⁴ Using an analogy to a card game, the fundamentals are the cards dealt to the candidates. In this game, each side knows what cards the other holds—so although 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.⁵ 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.

The dividing line between the pre-campaign fundamentals and the short-term considerations of the campaign is anything but clear. In the end, all influences on the vote are short-term, but all of these considerations are influenced (either directly or conditionally) by the pre-campaign fundamentals. Voters are

³ The election-deciding state was California in 1916, Florida in 2000, and Ohio in 2004. Actually a shift in a smaller number of votes in New Mexico, Iowa, and Colorado also could have tipped the electoral vote toward Kerry.

⁴ See James E. Campbell, "The Fundamentals in U.S. Presidential Elections: Public Opinion, the Economy, and Incumbency in the 2004 Presidential Election," *Journal of Elections, Public Opinion & Parties* 15 (Issue 1 2005):73–83; Campbell, *The American Campaign*, 13–22.

⁵ Lazarsfeld offered a different analogy. He wrote, "The campaign is like the chemical bath which develops a photograph. The chemical influence is necessary to bring out the picture, but only the picture pre-structured on the plate can come out." Paul F. Lazarsfeld, "The Election is Over," *Public Opinion Quarterly* 8 (Autumn 1944): 330. This portrays the campaign as a more-passive, less-influential process than in the card game analogy.

not amnesiacs. They evaluate what they hear in the course of the campaign in light of what they understood coming into it. Although many voters focus on politics only during the campaign, they still bring to the campaign experiences and impressions gathered between campaigns. Most often, these pre-campaign-based judgments and the partisanship they support strongly guide short-term evaluations to the vote. The nearly equal campaign efforts of both sides also limit the net impact of the overall campaign. Although overstating the case somewhat, Paul Lazarsfeld, more than a half century ago, made this point in concluding that “elections are decided by the events occurring in the entire period between two presidential elections and not by the campaign.”⁶ In the elections since Lazarsfeld wrote, campaigns between the conventions and Election Day have, on average, shifted the vote by only about 3.5 to 4 percentage points, maybe less.⁷ In the 2004 election, the shift was even smaller than this. Bush held a slight lead in the preference polls after the conventions, and his share of the vote was within 1 percentage point of that lead. Still, although the net effects of the 2004 campaign were small, there were significant (albeit largely offsetting) effects. Most notably, Senator Kerry received a boost from the three presidential debates and President Bush benefitted from the large increase in turnout. The key to understanding the 2004 election, however, rests with the political context of the election, the fundamentals. The first and most important of these is the public’s predisposition toward the candidates.

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 reelection 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 fifteen elections from 1948 to 2004.⁸ Both opinion measures

⁶ Lazarsfeld, “The Election is Over,” 330.

⁷ James E. Campbell, “When Have Presidential Campaigns Decided Election Outcomes?” *American Politics Research* 29 (September 2001): 437–460.

⁸ 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, Fourth Edition, Volume 1* (Washington, DC: CQ Press, 2001), 675–688; Leip, “Dave Leip’s Atlas.” The approval numbers from 1948 to 2000 have been gathered from various Gallup poll releases over the years. The 2004 number is from the 8–11 July poll by Gallup, “Presidential Ratings–Job Approval,” accessed on the website of The Gallup Organization at <http://www.gallup.com/> (28 November 2004). 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” accessed at the Gallup Poll website at <http://www.gallup.com/>, 28 November 2004. The 2004 number is from Gallup, “Trial Heat–Bush vs. Kerry (Registered Voters),” <http://www.gallup.com/election2004/numbers/heats/default.asp>, 5 November 2004. The preference poll numbers are of registered (not “likely”) voters.

TABLE 1
Pre-Campaign Public Opinion and the In-Party Vote, 1948–2004

<i>Presidential Approval in July</i>			<i>Labor Day Preference for In-Party Candidate</i>		
<i>Year</i>	<i>Approval Rating (%)</i>	<i>In-Party Vote (Two-Party %)</i>	<i>Year</i>	<i>In-Party % in Poll at Labor Day</i>	<i>In-Party Vote (Two-Party %)</i>
1964	74	61.3	1964	69.2	61.3
1956	69	57.8	1972	62.9	61.8
2000	59	50.3	1996	60.8	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	51.2	2004	50.5	51.2
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	Below 46%	Above 46%		Below 50%	Above 50%
Won	1	8		1	8
Lost	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.

are strong precursors of the vote several months later, having correlations with the vote of .82 and .86. The table orders the fifteen elections from 1948 to 2004 by each indicator from the most- to least-positive for the in-party candidate, along with the corresponding election results. The gap in each listing marks where 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 (although 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 shows, by both measures of public opinion, the reelection 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 won their election. Only Richard Nixon in 1960 fell short in his razor-thin loss to John Kennedy. Five of the six in-party candidates whose incumbents had lower approval ratings in July lost their elections. 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.

Labor Day preference polls tell the same story: on the eve of the campaign, the public was closely divided, but with a slight tilt toward Bush. Seven of the eight in-party candidates that stood at 50 percent or higher in the polls at Labor Day won their popular votes in November. Nixon in 1960 was again the exception. Of the six in-party candidates who trailed their opponents at Labor Day, again only Truman in 1948 came back to win the popular vote. 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 is short of 50 percent in the polls, so Bush's 50.5 percent of support in the polls set his candidacy on the positive side of the line. The pre-campaign tilt toward Bush is also evident in the American National Election Study (NES) data concerning when voters report having decided their vote choice.⁹ Those who said that they had decided how they would vote at or before the time of the national conventions reported voting for Bush over Kerry by 52.5 to 47.5 percent.

Why was pre-campaign opinion so divided, but with a slight tilt toward Bush? To a substantial degree, this reflects the defining feature of recent American politics: the evenly divided and party-polarized electorate.¹⁰ By party polarization, I mean an intensely felt affection for one political party (and its candidates and policy positions) accompanied by an intensely felt disaffection for the opposite party (and its candidates and policy positions). Although there is some debate over how divided the public is over policy issues, there is little question that the electorate is much more sharply divided into partisan camps than it has been since at least the 1960s.

There is a good deal of evidence of party polarization in recent surveys. For example, an October Gallup poll found that 71 percent of Republicans strongly approved and 68 percent of Democrats strongly disapproved of President Bush's job performance. According to Gallup's Jeffrey Jones, "Prior to Bush, no president had seen 60% of both parties with strong opposing views of his performance."¹¹ This polarization was by no means limited to views of President Bush, although NES data indicate that 84 percent of voting Democrats said that Bush had made them feel angry and 91 percent of voting Republicans said that he had made them feel proud. Since 1952, the NES has asked potential voters whether there were important differences in what the Republicans and

⁹ The American National Election Study (NES) 2004 data are the advance release, accessed at www.umich.edu/~nes/, 13 February 2005. I have weighted the data to the actual vote division to improve the accuracy of the data.

¹⁰ See Morris P. Fiorina, Samuel J. Abrams, and Jeremy C. Pope, *Culture War? The Myth of a Polarized America* (New York: Pearson Longman, 2005).

¹¹ Jeffrey M. Jones, "Views of Bush Reach New Heights of Polarization," accessed on the website of The Gallup Organization at <http://www.gallup.com/>, 21 October 2004. See also Jeffrey M. Jones, "Bush Ratings Show Historical Levels of Polarization," accessed at the website of The Gallup Organization at <http://www.gallup.com/>, 4 June 2004. Current partisan differences in rating Presidents Reagan and Clinton are quite large as well. See Jeffrey M. Jones, "Roosevelt, Kennedy Most Positively Rated Recent Presidents," accessed at the website of The Gallup Organization at <http://www.gallup.com/>, 6 November 2004.

Democrats stood for. In the typical election up until 1980, just barely half said they saw important party differences. This increased to about 62 percent in elections from 1984 to 2000. The number soared in 2004. More than 80 percent (and 86 percent of voters) said that they perceived important differences between what the parties stood for.¹² In the end, about 83 percent of voters in the NES (85 percent of Bush voters and 81 percent of Kerry voters) said that their candidate preference was strong.

There are several explanations for this party 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 1994.¹³ As Edward Carmines and James Stimson demonstrated some time ago, the collapse of the racial issue into the traditional government activism issue set in motion a domino effect, mobilizing and pulling African American voters into the Democratic Party and, over time, moving conservative white Southerners into the Republican Party.¹⁴ The Democratic Party became more homogeneously liberal, and the Republican Party became more homogeneously conservative. What Everett Carl Ladd referred to as the “post-industrial party system” is most clearly evident in the evolution of our political geography, with Northeastern states becoming solidly Democratic and the “Solid South” solidly Republican.¹⁵ This realignment set the parties near parity (similar to the party system in place from 1876 to 1896), adding further fuel to polarization. According to 2004 NES data, about 48 percent of voters identified themselves as Democrats and about 47 percent as Republicans.¹⁶ Moreover, partisanship is resurgent.¹⁷ Nearly 40 percent of voters indicated that they strongly identified themselves with the Democratic or Re-

¹² This comports with the findings of an ideological sorting out in the realignment. See Alan I. Abramowitz and Kyle L. Saunders, “Ideological Realignment in the U.S. Electorate,” *Journal of Politics* 60 (August 1998): 634–652. See also Marc J. Hetherington, “Resurgent Mass Partisanship: The Role of Elite Polarization,” *American Political Science Review* 95 (September 2001): 619–631. NES data for 2004 even report wide partisan divisions over perspectives on the nation. While 41 percent of voting Republicans agreed with the statement that there were “some things about America today that make me feel ashamed of America,” 74 percent of voting Democrats agreed with the statement. Sixty-five percent of voting Republicans, but only 35 percent of voting Democrats, said that it made them feel “extremely good” to see the American flag flying.

¹³ See Everett Carl Ladd, “The 1994 Congressional Elections: The Postindustrial Realignment Continues,” *Political Science Quarterly* 110 (Spring 1995): 1–23.

¹⁴ Edward G. Carmines and James A. Stimson, *Issue Evolution: Race and the Transformation of American Politics* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1989).

¹⁵ Everett Carl Ladd, “1996 Vote: The ‘No Majority’ Realignment Continues,” *Political Science Quarterly* 112 (Spring 1997): 2.

¹⁶ This parity is consistent with both the Edison-Mitofsky and *The Los Angeles Times* exit polls. Leaners in the NES data are counted as partisans and the data have been weighted to the actual vote division. Both the exit polls and NES indicate that the electorate was more Republican in 2004 than in 2000.

¹⁷ See Larry M. Bartels, “Partisanship and Voting Behavior, 1952–1996,” *American Journal of Political Science* 44 (April 2000): 35–50; Hetherington, “Resurgent Mass Partisanship,” 619–631; Campbell, *The American Campaign*, 216.

publican Parties (about as many strong partisans as in the 1950s and more than in any election since 1964) and about 90 percent of party identifiers voted for their respective party's presidential candidate.¹⁸

Adding to the long-term reasons for polarization in 2004 are two potent reasons particular to 2004. First, memories of the disputed 2000 election were still vivid. Adherents of both parties thought that the other side had attempted to steal the election. The everyday rhetoric of political discussions after 2000 became intemperate and harsh. Nearly 70 percent of Democratic voters in the 2004 NES survey said that they still felt strongly that the outcome of the 2000 election had been unfair. The war in Iraq further fueled 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. Some thought that the war was unnecessary, ill-conceived, based on inaccurate claims or lies, motivated by oil, poorly executed, too expensive in lives and resources, and ultimately counterproductive. Others thought that the war was necessary, in light of our international intelligence about the threat at the time (intelligence that initially received bipartisan support, including from Senator Kerry), fought to the best of our capabilities and with the best of intentions—that it would at least eliminate a brutal regime and might ultimately contain or reduce hostilities and terrorism exported from a perennially troubled region of the world. Reactions to Michael Moore's highly controversial film, *Fahrenheit 911*, exemplified just how bitter the political divisions had become.

Opinions 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) help to explain both the tilt of public opinion in Bush's favor as well as the closeness of the vote. Opinion about the war on terror consistently favored President Bush's reelection. A Gallup poll in late August (23–25) found Bush to be favored over Kerry in handling terrorism by a margin of 54 to 37 percent. The exit polls similarly found that Bush was more trusted to handle terrorism by a margin of 58 to 40 percent. NES data indicate that voters approved of Bush's handling of the war on terror by a margin of 55 to 45 percent. When asked which party would do a better job in handling the war on terror, voters favored the Republicans over the Democrats by a margin of 45 to 27 percent (with 27 percent saying that they thought both parties would handle it about equally well). The war on terror, along with the fact that Bush's general political perspectives were viewed by more voters as being more ideologically acceptable than Kerry's, were decided advantages for President Bush before and throughout the campaign.¹⁹

¹⁸ This is from NES data. The exact figures are that 89 percent of Democrats voted for Kerry and 92 percent of Republicans voted for Bush.

¹⁹ Gallup, "Political Ideology," accessed on the website of The Gallup Organization at <http://www.gallup.com/>, 4 November 2004.

Opinion on the war in Iraq was more evenly divided. Gallup in late August found that Bush was favored in handling “the situation in Iraq” by a margin of 49 to 43 percent.²⁰ Similarly, the exit polls showed that Bush’s decision to go to war in Iraq was supported by a margin among voters of 51 to 45 percent. On the other hand, only 44 percent of voters in the NES approved of Bush’s handling of the war, and 59 percent said that they thought the war was not worth the cost.²¹ This division of the public over Iraq and the slight lead that Kerry had over Bush on a number of domestic issues (the economy, healthcare, social security, the environment) of lesser salience in 2004 partially offset the advantages that Bush held on the terrorism issue and on his more conservative political perspective—but only partially.

Beyond the issues of the war on terror and the war in Iraq, the nominating conventions may have also contributed to Bush’s slight lead entering 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 received positive convention bumps in eighteen of the twenty national conventions between 1964 and 2000.²² Only Lyndon Johnson, who was already sky-high in the polls in 1964, and George McGovern, who had a divisive convention in 1972, failed to receive convention bumps. The Democrats had even received a bump from their disastrous 1968 convention in Chicago. Typically, a candidate has received a bump of about 6 or 7 percentage points, and the out-party has averaged closer to a nine-point bump. Although the Republican convention in 2004 only bumped Bush’s preferences up by about one point (according to registered voters in Gallup, and three or four points in other polls), Senator Kerry actually appeared to get no bump or to have lost ground during the Democratic convention. Although some polls showed a very slight bump for Kerry, the polls in general indicated a slight lead for Kerry before the conventions and a slight lead for Bush after them.²³

²⁰ Gallup, “Importance and Candidate Performance,” accessed on the website of The Gallup Organization at <http://www.gallup.com/>, 4 November 2004.

²¹ See CNN, “Election Results: Exit Polls.” accessed at <http://www.cnn.com/ELECTION/2004/pages/results/states/US/P/00/epolls.0.html>, 25 November 2004. This is the Edison-Mitofsky exit poll. Subsequent mentions of the exit poll are to this reference.

²² Campbell, *The American Campaign*, 145–151.

²³ Although there is concern about relying on a single polling organization, James Stimson’s pooled data on the preference polls corroborate the Gallup picture in this regard. See <http://www.unc.edu/~jstimson/>, accessed 14 November 2004. According to Stimson’s pooled data, Kerry dropped from 51.8 percent in the 25 July pre-convention polls to 50.5 percent in the 30 July post-convention polls. Although the *Washington Post* poll showed a four-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. See, Polling Report.com, “White House 2004: General Election,” www.pollingreport.com/wh04gen.htm, 6 November 2004. With this variance, a real increase in Kerry’s poll standing after the convention was possible, but

Why did Senator Kerry receive either no bump or a very slight one from the Democratic convention? Party polarization may have limited poll movement.²⁴ According to NES data, 56 percent of voters indicated that they had decided whom they would vote for before the national conventions. In the fourteen elections for which data are available, only in the 1956 election rematch between Dwight Eisenhower and Adlai Stevenson had this many voters decided this early how they would vote.²⁵ Most Democrats were already strongly united behind Kerry before the convention. Once the Howard Dean campaign for the Democratic nomination 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 might have received before the convention took place.

Beyond these factors for Kerry’s non-bump is the content of the Democratic Convention. The core message of the convention was about Senator Kerry’s war record in Vietnam.²⁶ This was captured in Kerry’s salute while reading the opening line of his nomination acceptance speech: “I’m John Kerry, and I’m reporting for duty.” Although this message may have been meant to neutralize the foreign policy advantage of a Republican incumbent and dissuade voters from the view that Democrats were soft or irresponsible on foreign policy, it may also 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 over 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 challenges to 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.²⁷

The decision to make “Kerry as war hero” the convention’s theme may also reflect the difficulty of finding a positive theme that could both energize and unite the party already united (but not fully so) around the negative theme of

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 indicated a four-point bump for Bush from the GOP convention, and the *Washington Post* poll showed a three-point gain.

²⁴ 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.

²⁵ Campbell, *The American Campaign*, 8.

²⁶ See Evan Thomas and *Newsweek’s* Special Project Team, “The Inside Story: How Bush Did It,” *Newsweek*, 15 November 2004, 80–81.

²⁷ 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, “The Inside Story: How Bush Did It,” 102.

opposing President Bush—a constraint that is part of the natural advantage of incumbency. The Kerry bandwagon had been set in motion by the desire to get behind someone who could defeat Bush—not by a positive attraction of support to the candidate.²⁸ In the end, the exit polls showed as much: Bush received nearly 60 percent of the votes of those who said that they were voting *for* their candidate, while Kerry received 70 percent of the votes of those who said that they were voting *against* the opponent.²⁹ With opposition to Bush as the fuel running the Democratic engine, the positive war hero theme fell flat in attracting further support.

THE PRE-CAMPAIGN ECONOMY

The second fundamental is the state of the economy leading into the election and, particularly, economic growth in the months immediately before the fall campaign. 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 look for reasons to continue the in-party's tenure. When it is not, they are more 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.³⁰

Despite much of the rhetoric of the campaign, the economy tilted in favor of President Bush's reelection 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 should have been an asset for the Bush campaign.

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, the percentage of Gallup poll respondents in the spring of the election year who indicated 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." The pattern of the three indicators is consistent across the years. Public satisfaction and recent economic growth were greater in 2000 than in either 1996 or 1992 and greater in 1996 than in 1992, and 2004 looks more like 1996 than either the boom leading into 2000 or the sluggish economy

²⁸ This is not to say that the Bush campaign and the Republican convention were without their share of negativity. Any witness to Democratic Senator Zell Miller's fiery condemnation at the Republican Convention of Senator Kerry's record can attest to this.

²⁹ CNN, "Election Results: Exit Polls," 25 November 2004.

³⁰ Campbell, *The American Campaign*, 126–139.

TABLE 2
*Economic Conditions Leading into the Presidential
 Campaigns, 1992–2004*

<i>Pre-Campaign Indicators of National Economy</i>	<i>Elections</i>			
	<i>1992</i>	<i>1996</i>	<i>2000</i>	<i>2004</i>
Average economic growth rate in previous two years (GDP through first quarter of the election year, annualized)	0.8%	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, “Economy (U.S.)” and “General Mood of the Country,” accessed at <http://www.gallup.com>, 28 November 2004 and the U.S. Bureau of Economic Analysis, “Table 1.1.6. Real Gross Domestic Product, Chained Dollars,” accessed at <http://www.bea.gov>, 28 November 2004. The economic conditions poll dates are 9–12 April 1992, 9–12 May 1996, 18–21 May 2000, and 2–4 May 2004. The satisfied with the way things are going poll dates are 7–10 May 1992, 9–12 May 1996, 18–21 May 2000, and 7–9 May 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 1 in year 2].

leading into 1992. The circumstances leading into 1992 contributed to the defeat of President George H.W. Bush. The circumstances leading into 1996 contributed to President Bill Clinton’s reelection, and it is commonly conceded that the circumstances of 2000 were advantageous for Al Gore. In short, an early reading of the economy before the 2004 election is that it should have been a political asset for President Bush.

The economy during the election year also favored President Bush. Table 3 provides some historical perspective on the election year economy, as measured by growth in the real GDP. Elections from 1948 to 2004 are ordered according to 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 annualized data are from the U.S. Bureau of Economic Analysis.³¹ Economic growth in both series is strongly correlated with the November vote (correlations of .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 lower than 2.5 percent. These may be thought

³¹ U.S. Bureau of Economic Analysis, “Table 1.1.6. Real Gross Domestic Product, Chained Dollars,” <http://www.bea.gov>, 28 November 2004.

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				
2004	3.9	51.2	1992	3.9	46.5	
2000	3.7	50.3	2004	3.3	51.2	
1988	3.5	53.9	1956	3.2	57.8	
1960	3.4	49.9	1976	3.0	49.0	
1996	2.9	54.7	1996	2.8	54.7	
1952	2.2	44.6	1952	0.3	44.6	
1956	0.6	57.8	1960	-2.0	49.9	
1980	-3.4	44.7	1980	-8.1	44.7	
In-Party	2.5%–	2.5 to 4%	4%+	2.5%–	2.5 to 4%	4%+
Won	1	4	4	0	3	6
Lost	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.

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. Hubert Humphrey, in 1968, and Gerald 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 from 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 this pattern was Eisenhower, in 1956, and the economy that year was rebounding by the second quarter.

By either measure, the economy in the months leading up to the campaign was “pretty good.” It ranks eighth or ninth of the fifteen 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 the effects of the election year econ-

omy. Although economic growth in the first part of 2004 was stronger than it had been when Bill Clinton was reelected in 1996, it was not quite as strong as it had been in 1992, when the president's father was 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 a bit 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, respondents favored Kerry over Bush in dealing with the economy by an average margin of 51 to 44 percent.³² Eight polls by ABC News conducted in October also indicated that Kerry held, on average, a 48 to 46 percent advantage over Bush regarding who likely voters thought would do a better job of handling the economy.³³ *The Los Angeles Times* exit poll found that nearly half of Kerry voters said that the economy was the most important problem, whereas fewer than one in five Bush voters had the economy at the top of their concerns.³⁴ 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.³⁵ Finally, although Bush had a general job approval rating of 52 percent of reported voters in the NES, only 44 percent of them indicated that they approved of his handling of the economy.

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 reelection concerned his leadership in the war against terrorism. Nearly half of the issue content of his speeches concerned terrorism or Iraq.³⁶ With Bush staying on the antiterrorism message, Kerry was allowed to frame the economic issue as a jobs loss issue, the terms most favorable to Kerry. Once Kerry (aided by media reports emphasizing negative news about the economy) framed the economic issue as a jobs loss issue, President Bush was on the defensive.³⁷ According to data reported by Paul Abramson, John Aldrich, and David

³² Gallup, "Importance and Candidate Performance," accessed on the website of The Gallup Organization at <http://www.gallup.com/>, 4 November 2004.

³³ ABC News. "Poll: Campaign '04 Closes With a One-Point Race," Campaign Tracking #26, accessed at <http://abcnews.go.com/Politics/Vote2004/>, 31 October 2004.

³⁴ PollingReport.com. "Exit Poll: Los Angeles Times exit poll," accessed at <http://www.pollingreport.com/2004.htm#Exit>, 26 November 2004.

³⁵ 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 indicated that more voters said that they trusted Bush to handle the economy (49 percent) than Kerry (45 percent). Nevertheless, the bulk of the evidence suggests that the economy as an issue cut in Kerry's favor.

³⁶ Paul R. Abramson, John H. Aldrich, and David W. Rohde, "The 2004 Presidential Election: The Emergence of a Permanent Majority?" *Political Science Quarterly* 20 (Spring 2005): 33–57.

³⁷ Thomas M. Holbrook, "Good News for Bush? Economic News, Personal Finances, and the 2004 Presidential Election," *PS: Political Science and Politics* 37 (October 2004): 759–761.

Rohde, the economy was the subject of less than 30 percent of the issue content of Bush's campaign speeches, but nearly 40 percent that of Kerry's campaign speeches.³⁸ So despite respectable (albeit not glowing) economic numbers, the economy as an issue was owned by Kerry in this election. As an issue, the economy was expendable to the Bush campaign because it could be largely neutralized and ultimately trumped by the terrorism issue.

INCUMBENCY AND THE PARTY TERM

The third fundamental is incumbency, both personal and party term.³⁹ The advantages of personal presidential incumbency, from the risk aversion of voters to agenda-setting to the "Rose Garden" strategy to greater intraparty unity are well established. As the failed campaigns of Presidents Gerald Ford, Jimmy Carter, and George H.W. Bush demonstrate, these advantages are no guarantee of reelection. Nevertheless, incumbency is a substantial asset. Since 1868, there have been seventeen elected incumbents who sought reelection, and eleven (65 percent) were successful. Four of the five incumbents who reached the office by succession and then stood for election during this period were successful. Only Gerald Ford fell short and then only barely so. Presidents as candidates are rarely trounced at the polls.⁴⁰ Even President Carter, who ran with a foreign policy debacle, a terrible economy, and a divided party, garnered about 45 percent of the vote. Incumbents simply seeking a second term for their party in the White House are especially advantaged.⁴¹ 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/outsider 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 thirty-five 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 records and the median votes tell the same story. Non-incumbent in-party candidates and incumbents seeking more than a second term for their party are at neither a competitive advantage or disadvantage. Their me-

³⁸ Abramson, Aldrich, and Rohde, "The 2004 Presidential Election," 40, 45.

³⁹ Campbell, *The American Campaign*, 101–125.

⁴⁰ Of the twenty-two incumbents who sought reelection between 1868 and 2004, only two (Taft and Hoover) lost in landslides. Nine nonincumbents during this period lost in landslides.

⁴¹ See, Alan I. Abramowitz, "Bill and Al's Excellent Adventure: Forecasting the 1996 Presidential Election," and Helmut Norpoth, "Of Time and Candidates: A Forecast for 1996," both in James E. Campbell and James C. Garand, eds., *Before the Vote: Forecasting American National Elections* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2000), 47–81.

TABLE 4
Incumbency, the Party Term and the Vote, 1868–2004

	<i>In-Party Nonincumbents</i>	<i>Incumbents Seeking beyond a Second Party Term</i>	<i>Incumbents Seeking a Second Party Term</i>
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. Since 1948, the median vote percentages are 49.9 ($N = 5$) for nonincumbents, 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.

dian votes and win-loss records are nearly fifty-fifty. Incumbents seeking a second term for their party, however, have a considerable advantage. Of the thirteen cases that fit this description since 1868, the incumbent won on all but two occasions.⁴² Their median two-party vote is nearly 55 percent. The median vote for these incumbents since 1948 is a remarkable 57.8 percent. Eisenhower in 1956, Johnson in 1964, Nixon in 1972, and Ronald 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.

As an incumbent seeking a second party term for the Republicans, President Bush enjoyed a considerable advantage—but why didn't he receive the large vote majority of most previous second party term presidents? One reason is polarization. With the nation as polarized as it was, Democrats were more united than an out-party would normally be opposing 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 front-runner Howard Dean for Senator Kerry (but some bumper stickers could also be produced as evidence). 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.⁴³ Normally, a party out of the White House for just four years would still be engaged in internal struggles for control of the party.⁴⁴ They might even think that the election

⁴² The two incumbents seeking a second party term who lost were Benjamin Harrison, who lost to Grover Cleveland in 1892, and Jimmy Carter, who lost to Ronald Reagan in 1980.

⁴³ Gallup, "Seen as Best Candidate to Beat Bush, Kerry Poised for N.H. Victory," accessed at the website of The Gallup Organization at <http://www.gallup.com/>, 26 January 2004.

⁴⁴ Elsewhere, I have presented evidence of greater early internal party unity for incumbents, especially those seeking a second party term. See James E. Campbell, "Nomination Politics, Party Unity, and Presidential Elections" in James P. Pfiffner and Roger H. Davidson, eds., *Understanding the Presi-*

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.

A second reason for the close election of a second party term incumbent was the war in Iraq. Although the president received high marks from voters for his decisiveness and strength of leadership, the war in Iraq (both concern about it and opposition to it) made the election closer than it might have been otherwise. Although 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.⁴⁵ Among exit poll respondents who said that terrorism was the most important issue, Bush won 86 percent of the votes. 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 the U.S. in Iraq," Kerry received 82 percent of the votes. Kerry might have done even better on 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 and simply favored an "anybody-but-Bush" Democrat.

CAMPAIGN EFFECTS: THE DEBATES AND TURNOUT

Although the campaign left the race pretty much where it had begun, it had its definite ups and downs for the candidates.⁴⁶ The Kerry campaign experienced the upside with the three presidential debates. This was negated, in large part, by the tremendous surge in turnout that defied the conventional wisdom that high-turnout elections help the Democrats. The huge increase in turnout, on balance, and quite to the contrary of conventional wisdom, boosted the Republican vote.

Throughout September, President Bush held a small but steady lead in the polls over Senator Kerry. This all changed with the three presidential debates. As Table 5 demonstrates, at the end of September, Bush led Kerry by 54 to 46 percent among registered voters in the Gallup poll.⁴⁷ About two weeks later, a few days after the third debate, the Bush lead over Kerry had been reduced to

dency, Third Edition, 2004 Election Season Update (New York: Pearson Longman 2005), 71–84. Although there were early outward signs of Democratic Party unity behind Kerry in 2004, NES data indicate that Republicans outnumbered Democrats among early-deciding voters and that although early-deciding Democrats were united (94 percent voting for Kerry), early-deciding Republicans were even more so (97 percent voting for Bush).

⁴⁵ Gallup, "Importance and Candidate Performance," 4 November 2004.

⁴⁶ The largest systematic effect of campaigns is the result of intense and balanced competition (Campbell, *The American Campaign*). This makes presidential elections closer than they appeared at the outset. Because the 2004 race was close from the beginning, the effect of competition was slight, but still helps to explain the narrowness of the Bush majority.

⁴⁷ Gallup, "Trial Heat," 5 November 2004.

TABLE 5

The Campaign Effects of the 2004 Presidential Debates

	<i>Who Did the Better Job in the Debate?</i>		<i>Was Your Opinion of the Candidate More Favorable After Debate?</i>		<i>Candidate Preference</i>	
	<i>Bush</i>	<i>Kerry</i>	<i>Bush</i>	<i>Kerry</i>	<i>Bush</i>	<i>Kerry</i>
First debate (30 September)	37	53	21	46	54.1	45.9
Second debate (6–8 October)	45	47	31	38	52.1	47.9
Third debate (11–13 October)	39	52	27	42	48.9	51.9
Post-debates (14–16 October)					51.3	48.7
Net change (from pre- to post-debates)					–2.8 Bush	

Note: The data are from Gallup polls conducted on the indicated dates. The numbers are percentages. The “better job” question was: “Regardless of which candidate you happen to support, who do you think did the better job in the debate?” The “more favorable” question was: “How has your opinion of [candidate] been affected by the debate? Is your opinion of [candidate]—More favorable, Less favorable, or Has it not changed much?”

51 to 49 percent. *Time* polls had Bush slipping from 52.2 percent of two-party support before the debates to a tie with Kerry after the debates, and *The Los Angeles Times* polls had nearly identical numbers.⁴⁸ A compilation of polls of registered voters in the four days before the first debate had Bush with a 53 to 47 percent lead over Kerry. A similar compilation of polls in the four days after the debate had Bush leading Kerry by 51.8 to 48.2 percent, a decline of 1.2 points.⁴⁹

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.⁵⁰ 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. Although much of this effect was probably ephemeral, some of this effect may have survived to the election. Kerry had established his credibility with many voters. Kerry lagged behind Bush before the debates, but the race was tight in the weeks that followed. Although their effects are more difficult to track, the fact that Democratic-oriented “527” groups in the campaign were outspending Republican-oriented groups by almost four to one (\$321 million to \$84 million) probably also helped to tighten the race.⁵¹

The debates and the campaign surrounding them rejuvenated the Kerry campaign, but the second major campaign effect largely offset this and also

⁴⁸ PollingReport.com, “White House 2004,” 14 November 2004.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ Gallup, “Kerry Wins Debate,” 1 October 2004, “Standoff in Second Debate,” 9 October 2004, and “Kerry Wins Third Debate,” 18 October 2004, accessed on the website of The Gallup Organization at <http://www.gallup.com/>.

⁵¹ Steve Weissman and Ruth Hassan, “BCRA and 527 Groups” in Michael J. Malbin, ed., *The Election after Reform: Money, Politics and the Bipartisan Campaign Reform Act* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, forthcoming).

took many by surprise. Most of the final polls and projections in the final day or two before Election Day expected a closer popular vote than the final count reflected. Thirteen of sixteen final polls and projections expected Bush to receive a smaller vote than he actually received.⁵² The median projection was about three-quarters of a point lower than Bush's actual vote share. Part of this shortfall can be traced to the pollsters' reliance on the "incumbency rule," that those undecided in the last days of the campaign split heavily against the incumbent. This rule, however, does not seem applicable to presidential contests, because both candidates are so well known. Very late deciders are more likely to split evenly, with a tilt toward their party's candidate.⁵³

Final polls and projections may also have underestimated the Bush vote because they did not anticipate Republicans receiving a boost from the election's unusually high turnout. The belief that Democrats routinely benefit from high turnout has managed to survive evidence to the contrary. The conventional wisdom that Democrats are helped by high turnout is based on the well-established relationships between sociodemographic factors, partisanship, and turnout. However, what is most important about nonvoters is not that they are sociodemographically similar to voting Democrats, but that they are politically distinct from either voting Democrats or voting Republicans. For instance, NES data indicate that among nonvoters with a preference in 2004, Bush was preferred to Kerry (51.2 percent to 47.6 percent). Moreover, there are not simply two kinds of potential voters (voters and nonvoters) but at least three (voters, nonvoters who might conceivably vote, and those who could not be dragged to the polls), and the usual nonvoters who could be mobilized may not look as much like would-be Democrats as the hard-core nonvoters.

Although both Bush and Kerry added voters to their parties' columns compared to the 2000 election, the increase in turnout in 2004, on balance, helped Bush and hurt Kerry. Table 6 presents the evidence. Because there is some debate about how turnout is best measured, I calculated two different measures of turnout change in the states from the 2000 election to 2004. The first is the difference in the traditional turnout rates (the number of voters divided by the voting age population in each year). The second is the increase in the number voting in a state as a percentage of those who had voted in 2000. The growth in turnout, measured in these two different ways, is explained by the closeness of the election in the state and the percentage of the state vote cast for President Bush. By both measures of turnout change, turnout increased more if the state

⁵² PollingReport.com, "White House 2004," 14 November 2004.

⁵³ 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. The exit poll and NES data are at odds over who was favored by very-late-deciding voters. The exit poll indicates that the 11 percent of voters deciding in the last week to Election Day divided about 54 to 46 percent in favor of Kerry. The NES data indicate that those deciding in the last week or on Election Day (codes 9 and 10 of the time-of-decision question) split about 58 to 42 percent in favor of Bush.

TABLE 6
Explaining Turnout Change in the States from 2000 to 2004

<i>Independent variables</i>	<i>Dependent Variable: State Turnout Change from 2000 to 2004</i>	
	<i>Change in Turnout Rates (1.)</i>	<i>Change in Total Turnout as a % of Prior Turnout (2.)</i>
Bush vote percentage in 2004 (two-party vote)	.34* (6.29)	.46* (3.99)
Closeness of the vote (negative of absolute vote margin)	.43* (5.24)	.81* (4.57)
Constant	-11.64	-2.62
Adjusted R^2	.45	.30
Standard error	2.44	5.21

Note: $N = 50$. * $p < 0.01$. In equation 1, the dependent variable is the state's turnout rate in 2004 as a percentage of its voting age population minus the same rate in 2000. In equation 2, the dependent variable is the difference between the total vote in the state in 2004 and 2000 as a percentage of the state's total vote in 2000. Closeness of the vote in the state is the negative of the absolute difference between the Bush two-party vote and 50 percent. The correlation between the two turnout change measures is .51. Because the District of Columbia was identified as an influence point in an initial analysis and is also an obvious outlier in its vote, it is excluded from the analysis.

was a battleground, closely fought state. Turnout also increased more in states in which Bush won a larger share of the vote.⁵⁴ President Bush carried each of the top nine states to register the largest turnout increases by the proportional measure and twelve of the top fifteen to see the greatest gains by the traditional voting-age population measure.

Why did President Bush benefit from high turnout? Contrary to speculation in the aftermath of the election, the gay marriage referenda on the ballots in eleven states apparently had nothing to do with this. After considering the Bush appeal in a state and the closeness of the presidential contest in the state, whether a state had a gay marriage referendum on the ballot made no difference to turnout change. The carefully coordinated Republican GOTV effort may have boosted turnout to President Bush's advantage; but perhaps more importantly, high turnout may have favored the president because marginal voters were more likely to be energized by the positive messages of voting for Bush than the negative messages for voting against him.⁵⁵ Whatever the cause,

⁵⁴ One might expect that the Bush vote share would be the dependent variable, affected by turnout levels. However, the Bush vote share here is regarded as a surrogate for the effort and appeal of Bush in a state, a condition potentially affecting turnout. The analysis indicates that with the closeness of states held constant, those in which Bush exerted a greater appeal were likely to experience greater gains in turnout than those in which Kerry exerted a greater appeal.

⁵⁵ See Jonathan Tilove, "Cutting-edge Mobilization May Have Won the Day for Bush," Newhouse News Service, accessed at <http://www.newhousenews.com/archive/tilove112604.html>, 25 November 2004. On the other hand, there were more potential voters in the NES reporting that they were contacted by the Democrats than by the Republicans and a larger portion of those contacted by the Democrats reported that they turned out to vote.

Republicans were mobilized. The percentage of voters identifying themselves as Republicans (leaners included) increased by 2.1 percentage points over 2000, whereas the percentage identifying themselves as Democrats (including leaners) and Independents dropped by .4 and 1.7 percentage points, respectively. Moreover, for the first time in the over fifty-year history of the NES, strong Republicans comprised more than one-fifth of all voters and (also for the first time in at least fifty years) they outnumbered strong Democrats. Among voters, 21 percent identified themselves as strong Republicans and 19 percent identified themselves as strong Democrats. The 2004 election took the conventional wisdom that high turnout helps Democrats, shook it by its heels, and stood it on its head.

THE MORAL OF THE STORY

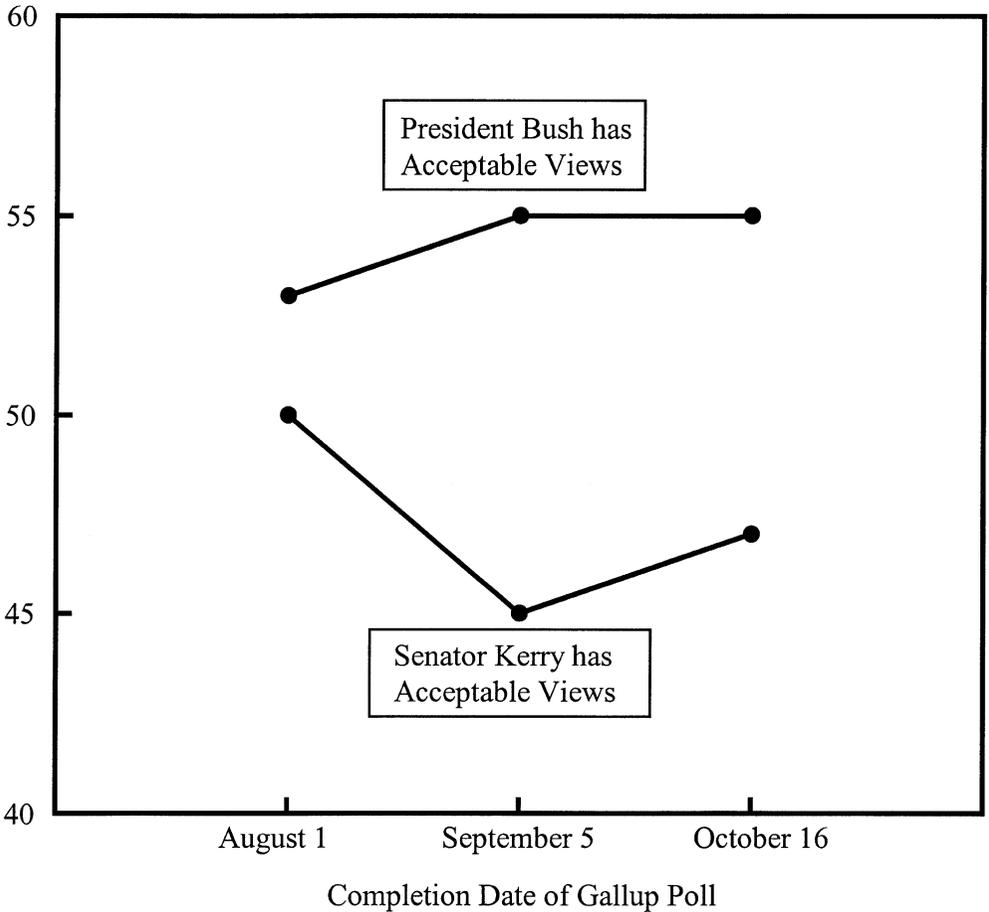
The fundamentals in the 2004 election established a setting somewhat favorable to the reelection of President Bush, and the net effect of the campaign did not alter this much. The public was predisposed, if only slightly, toward President Bush's reelection. The economy was favorable, again, if only slightly. And the fact that the president was seeking a second term for the Republicans after the eight years of the Clinton presidency also favored his reelection. Partially offsetting these Bush advantages were the divisions over the war in Iraq and the vehemence with which Democrats wanted Bush out of office. These conditions made the election a close one.

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 would have expected if one looked at the match-up from a longer perspective: an election between a sitting conservative Republican president from the south against a northern liberal Senator. Figure 1 tells the story. It plots an index of ideological acceptability over three Gallup polls conducted in early August, early September (the kickoff of the general election campaign), and mid-October.⁵⁶ 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: more thought that Senator Kerry was too liberal than thought that President Bush was too conservative.⁵⁷ In the August Gallup poll, half of the respondents thought that

⁵⁶ Gallup, "Political Ideology," accessed at the website of The Gallup Organization at <http://www.gallup.com/>, 4 November 2004.

⁵⁷ 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. A proximity index using self-placement and perceptions of the candidates' ideologies in NES data (both adjusted so that the "slight" liberal and conservative positions were coded as liberals and conservatives, much as leaners are coded as partisans in the party identification scale) finds Bush to be the more ideologically proximate candidate to 47.4 percent of voters, while Kerry was closer to 39.6 percent and the candidates were equally close to 13.2 percent.

FIGURE 1
*Acceptability of President Bush's and Senator Kerry's
 Political Ideologies*



Note: Acceptability Ideology Index. 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 that his views were "about right" or "too conservative."

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 found them 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 them too conservative. The ideological acceptability gap ranged from three points to ten points, but at all times

avored President Bush. In short, the results of 2004 would appear to once again confirm the conventional wisdom that Northern Democratic liberals (Hubert Humphrey, George McGovern, Walter Mondale, Michael Dukakis, and now John Kerry) are too far out of sync with the views of America's median voter to be elected president.

Although there is no doubt that voters mean 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." Although the margins were slightly smaller than on the ideology question (+2 to +5 Bush), the gap was consistent. The exit polls also indicated that while Kerry received 85 percent of the liberal vote, Bush received 84 percent of the conservative vote. The difference is that conservatives greatly outnumber liberals. In both the exit polls and the NES (for reported voters) the ratio was eight conservatives for every five liberals.

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. 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. The surge in turnout is more accurately interpreted as a broader phenomenon of a mobilized conservative base rallying to the side of a conservative president conducting a war and under siege—from the harsh attacks of the opposing party and allied critics (both at home and overseas). Together with a share of moderates, they constituted the reelection majority. However, although he received 91 percent of the votes 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. Although incumbency played a role in Bush's reelection, there was more substance to it than that alone would suggest. A slim majority of voters, but at any rate a majority, preferred the perspective on leadership that President Bush brought to the presidency to that offered by Senator Kerry.

For Democrats, the 2004 election brought bad and perhaps worse news. President Bush, a president for whom many Democrats had developed a visceral distaste, was reelected with a popular vote majority. This was the bad news for Democrats. The potentially worse news for them is that the election was close. The fact that Senator Kerry came as close to defeating President Bush as he did may convince Democrats that there is no compelling reason to moderate their perspectives to bring them more into line with the median American voter. Some in the party continue to believe that the problem is not with excesses in the party's liberal philosophy, but with its candidates, tactics, public relations, or even with Republican shenanigans at the polls.

This may well be whistling past the political graveyard. The election was close because of party polarization, and that looks to be here to stay, but also because some of the fundamentals were less tilted in the Republicans' favor than they might have been and, in several respects, this particular campaign developed favorably for Democrats. Beyond party polarization, the election was close because pre-campaign public support for Bush was dampened by divisions over the war in Iraq. Developments during the campaign also kept the election close—the strategic considerations that allowed Senator Kerry to benefit from the economic issue, Kerry's stronger performance in the debates, the Democrats' money advantage from the 527 groups, the mobilization of Democrats partially offsetting the Republican turnout surge, and the anemic showing by Ralph Nader. These conditions helped Democrats in 2004, but may not be factors in future contests. Moreover, even with these campaign developments favorable to the Democrats, Republicans won the election with a popular vote majority while adding to their majorities in both the House and the Senate. The silver linings to the 2004 clouds hovering over Democrats is that their candidate in 2008 will not face President Bush, that it is unknown whether the Republicans can replicate their turnout surge of 2004, and that the Republicans will be seeking a third consecutive party term—at least initially placing the parties on a more level playing field.*

* This article is a greatly expanded and revised version of an article that appeared in the electronic journal *The Forum*.