Moral Visions and the New American Politics

The presidential election of 2000 was one of the most remarkable in American history for a variety of reasons. The extraordinary closeness of the race and the protracted legal battle over its ultimate outcome were both unprecedented and unlikely to be repeated. Beyond the questions of how the Florida morass should have been resolved and whether the election was "stolen" from its rightful victor, however, are more fundamental ones about the changing nature of partisan politics in America. Putting legal arguments aside, the political reality is that George Bush and Al Gore finished the 2000 campaign essentially in a dead heat, despite the tremendous advantages that Gore possessed from the outset of the campaign. He was the sitting vice president in an administration that had presided over a decade of almost incredible economic prosperity, in which unemployment, inflation, and interest rates simultaneously flirted with historic lows and the stock market generated significant wealth for a broad segment of the American population. He was heir apparent to an incumbent who, despite his personal foibles, enjoyed a steady job approval rating in excess of 60 percent. His opposition from Bill Bradley in the Democratic primary had evaporated quickly,

consistently been at the center of presidential campaigns, and a citizen's perceptions of how the incumbent party had handled the nation's economy were reliable predictors of his vote on election day.² Based on these assumptions, Gore was clearly in good shape. According to the 2000 American National Election Study,³ about 80 percent of Americans thought that the Clinton/Gore administration had done a good job in handling the nation's economy (and most of the rest were committed Republicans whose votes Gore could not hope to win in any case). Strikingly, however, more than 40 percent of these same people voted for George Bush in the presidential election. c0 presidential

As a result, party allegiance quite naturally fell at least roughly along class lines. Republicans represented the affluent, Democrats represented the poor and working class, and both parties battled for those in the middle, whose votes determined the outcomes of elections. Higher levels of income and education, the clearest demographic indicators of social class in America, were strongly associated with Republican allegiance from the 1930s all the way through the 1980s. Moral and religious issues remained clearly secondary to the partisan alignment, and peripheral to the meaning of "liberal" and "conservative" in America.

For proof of this claim, one need look no further than two majorparty candidates for president during that era. When Barry Goldwater became the Republican nominee in 1964, he was generally regarded as the paradigmatic staunch conservative, perhaps even radically or frighteningly so. Goldwater, who served for many years as a senator from Arizona after his unsuccessful presidential bid, was not especially religious and was a supporter of legalized abortion and expanded homosexual rights.4 Conversely, Jimmy Carter, the Democratic candidate in 1976 and 1980, was a devout evangelical Christian, a Southern Baptist who spoke in biblical terms of having committed adultery "in his heart" by having looked with lust on a woman other than his wife. As late as 1976, in Carter's race against Gerald Ford, it was not entirely clear which major party candidate was more pro-life or pro-choice on the abortion question. Needless to say, it is almost unimaginable today that such candidates would be their respective parties' standard-bearers. The essence of what it means to be a Democrat or a Republican, a liberal or a conservative, has changed significantly over the past two decades, not moving away altogether from the economic issue dimension but adding to it in a very prominent place a dimension of competing moral visions. It is this shift in the issues that divide the parties that made possible George Bush's victory in 2000 over an opponent bearing the mantle of peace and prosperity.

A decline in the predominance of economic issues as bases for political contestation is consistent with the theory of "postmaterialism" advanced for some time by Ronald Inglehart and colleagues.6

entries in the table represent the difference in Republican vote share between individuals in the highest category of the variable in question and those in the lowest category (adjusted so that in every case the comparison groups represent at least 10 percent of the sample, to prevent misleading results stemming from extreme outliers).8 Thus, the wealthy are compared with the poor, college graduates with high school dropouts, and those who attend church regularly with those who never attend religious services. The results here are unmistakable-education has vanished as a significant predictor of candidate choice, income remains relevant but is of declining importance,9 and religiosity has surged into the clear lead among these factors. Moreover, the numbers suggest that the critical importance of religiosity in shaping presidential vote choice is not an anomaly of the 2000 campaign. It began to emerge as a discernible factor in the 1988 campaign, then became the most important of these determinants in the 1992 election cycle (coincident with Pat Buchanan's declaration of a "culture war" at the Republican National Convention). Clearly, religious devotion for some years now has gained in explanatory power at the expense of more conventional socioeconomic predictors of candidate choice. The 2000 campaign merely marked the first time that the shift actually changed the outcome of a presidential election.

Table 1
Impact of Selected Variables on Republican Vote Choice (Whites)

	Income	Education	Church Att.
1956:	+35%	+34%	+05%
1964:	+26%	+25%	+05%
1976:	+42%	+24%	+03%
1988:	+23%	+18%	+11%
1992:	+14%	+10%	+33%
1996:	+23%	+12%	+36%
2000:	+13%	-	

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Gender

Male 58%

Female 49% Gender Gap = 9%

Education

High School or Less 49%

Post-Graduate 46% Education Gap = 3%

Church Attendance

Weekly + 77%

Never 42% Religion Gap = 35%

Of course, this is not the first time that religion has played a key role in American political life. Religious people and organizations were very active in the abolition, temperance, and civil rights movements, and their efforts transformed politics in very important ways. It is not even the first time that religious issues have figured prominently in a presidential election, as candidates AI Smith and John Kennedy could certainly attest. The new development that distinguishes the current religiously based political alignment from previous ones is the nature of the cleavage. In the past, religious divisions in American politics tended to run along a denominational divide, often pitting Catholics and Protestants on opposite sides of the partisan battle. In 2000, however, the forces uniting religiously observant white Christians of different denominational backgrounds were much stronger than those dividing them. 11 The relevant question, generally speaking, for candidate choice in 2000 was not where one went to church, but whether one went to church. The figures in Table 3 reflect this new religious divide. For the first time, devout adherents of all of America's major white religious traditions¹² lined up solidly behind the same candidate (in this case George Bush), with each group giving him more than 70 percent support. Conversely, Gore's solid support coalition was composed of secular whites and ethnic minorities (blacks, Hispanics, and Jews). Those in the middle, who did not give overwhelming support to either candidate, were the nominal members of the various white Christian religious traditions those who profess affiliation with a specific religious group, but who

are not particularly orthodox or devout. They are the key political battleground for whose allegiance the two parties must struggle, people who are, generally speaking, not wedded to either of the starkly different moral visions that have come to characterize the poles of modern American politics.

Table 3 2000 Bush Vote by Religious Group¹⁵

Mormons White Observant Evangelical Protestants White Observant Main-Line Protestants White Observant Roman Catholics	88% 86% 75% 70%
White Nominal Main-Line Protestants White Nominal Evangelical Protestants White Nominal Roman Catholics	48% 46% 35%
Secular Whites Hispanic Catholics and Protestants Jews Black Protestants	30% 28% 23% 4%

So what exactly, one might reasonably ask, are these competing visions? Put differently, what are the weapons with which the political combatants join battle over the terrain described above? Church attendance and religiosity, heretofore analyzed as the main variables of significance, are really just proxies for much deeper and more comprehensive divisions stemming from fundamentally divergent world views. One of the moral visions, embraced in greater or lesser degree by a large segment of the American electorate, might be termed "moral libertarianism." Its adherents have applauded the weakening of traditional norms in American society, particularly on issues of sexuality and the family. They would welcome a decreased role for religion in American public life, regarding religious institutions often as knee-jerk defenders of an outmoded, restrictive, and increasingly irrelevant system of moral strictures. The buzz words for this group are "tolerance" and "choice," invoked to combat legal

gay rights to unwed motherhood to the use of narcotics. On the other side, these moral libertarians confront a similarly large group devoted to "moral traditionalism." These individuals see much of the cultural change of the past 40 years as fundamentally destructive, and attribute many contemporary social ills such as crime, illegitimacy, and drug addiction to the erosion of consensus on basic moral norms in America. For them, America's Judeo-Christian religious heritage is fundamental to the nation's identity and should be embraced rather than shunned in institutions and public life. Their mantra is "family values," generally taken to mean the defense of the traditional familial unit against the evils of abortion, divorce, homosexuality, and promiscuity so blithely embraced, as they see it, by the moral libertarians.

The historical roots of these competing moral visions, at least from a partisan political standpoint, stretch back 30 years. In a 10-year period in America in the 1960s and 1970s, school prayer was outlawed, abortion was made available on demand, the contemporary femin rmoveenta rosi ro rocial rromisnene, rnd roe ray rights]TJET BT

agree or disagree. Table 4 breaks down these responses by presenting the percentage of those who "strongly agree" and "strongly disagree" with each statement who voted for George Bush in 2000.14 The differences are stark. Those who embrace the "newer lifestyles" are 35 percent less likely to vote for Bush than those who reject them. Those who emphasize "traditional family ties" are fully 45 percent more likely to support Bush than are those who doubt these ties as a solution to America's social problems. Finally, in two different but related formulations of the question, ethical relativists are over 40 percent less likely to support Bush than are ethical absolutists. Clearly, these competing moral visions are real, measurable, and of tremendous political consequence.

Table 4 2000 Bush Vote by Response to Selected Survey Items

"The newer lifestyles are contributing to the breakdown of our society."

Strongly Agree: 64% Bush Vote Strongly Disagree: 31% Bush Vote

"The world is always changing and we should adjust our view of

Thus, it appears clear that a religious-secular cleavage, rooted in starkly different moral visions of the good society, has come to play over the past several elections a very prominent role in American politics, upsetting the applecant of economically based electoral forecasting in 2000. It is important, however, to mention some caveats to the morally based partisan dichotomy presented here, as there are at least two major groups that do not fit neatly into the scheme outlined above.

The most glaring exception to the new partisan alignment based on religion and morality is the African American community (and, to a lesser and perhaps more transitory extent, the Latino community). Even though African Americans are overwhelmingly Christian, more religiously observant on average than whites, and generally more conservative on issues like abortion, school prayer, and homo-

another party that emphasizes a skewed view of Christianity elevating personal morality at the expense of a social conscience. Although these individuals are relatively few in the electorate, they tend to be over-represented among Christian intellectuals and clergy in many denominations, and thus bear watching as the ongoing realignment unfolds.

As the primary purpose of this essay is descriptive and analytical rather than prescriptive and normative, it largely has avoided the question of whether the changing basis of political contestation revealed in the 2000 election is "desirable." There are many arguments that could be offered to support either side on this score, from a variety of different perspectives. The question should not be answered from a partisan perspective, because the new religiously based cleavage does not provide a strong advantage for either major party. Although it clearly worked to the benefit of Republicans in 2000 by partially obscuring the importance of economic considerations, it could just as easily have worked to the advantage of Democrats had the circumstances been reversed. It is important to remember that the moral libertarians are just as numerous as the moral traditionalists, and just as committed to their vision of the good

Endnotes

1 For a summary of many of the most prominent of these models and their components, see James E. Campbell and James C. Garand, eds. *Before the Vote: Forecasting American National Elections* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 2000).

- one (New Mexico, which he barely lost) of the 10 poorest. Conversely, Gore won seven of the 10 wealthiest states (with Alaska, Colorado, and Virginia being the exceptions).
- 10 Indeed, religiosity is likely one factor mitigating the gender gap, as women are over-represented among frequent church attenders.
- 11 This political cooperation of orthodox Christians across sectarian lines reflects a trend over the past several decades in which denominational divisions have become less important, both socially and politically. For more on this phenomenon, see Robert Wuthnow, *The Restructuring of American Religion: Society and Faith since World War II* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press. 1988).
- 12 The categorization of Protestant denominations into the broad religious traditions of mainline (Episcopalian, Methodist, Presbyterian, etc.) and evangelical (Baptist, Church of Christ, Pentecostal, etc.) follows the classification scheme outlined in John C. Green, James L. Guth, Lyman A. Kellstedt, and Corwin E. Smidt, Religion and the Culture Wars: Dispatches Witions earlichth (Listenburgan) & Littlefield, 1996).
- 13 For a model of gradual, group-based partisan realignment over time, see V.O. Key, "Secular Realignment and the Party System," *Journal of Politics* 21 (1959): 198-210.
- 14 It is important to note that these groups do not represent radical or extremist outliers. For every question, at least 20 percent of the total sample strongly agreed and at least 20 percent strongly disagreed.
- 15 The figures presented here are based on data from James L. Guth, Lyman A. Kellstedt, John C. Green, and Corwin E. Smidt, "America Fifty/Fifty," First