

*Campaigning and Governing:
The 2004 Elections and Their Aftermath*
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This is a fascinating time in American politics. It is also a deeply discouraging one. A country that has long thought of itself as the democratic exemplar for the rest of the world has properly been subject to widespread criticism for its highly decentralized and error-prone system of election administration, an antiquated electoral college that relegates a majority of citizens to the sidelines in presidential elections, a highly politicized process of legislative redistricting that diminishes competition and facilitates partisan bias, and the problematic ways in which money shapes politics and policymaking.

Recent years have brought a series of dramatic events – the impeachment of President Bill Clinton, the controversial resolution of the 2000 presidential election, the bursting of the stock market bubble and the end of the longest economic expansion in our history, the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, corporate scandals, and military action in Afghanistan and Iraq. The Bush

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administration has achieved striking reversals in policy – domestic and international – following a dead-heat presidential election that provided no semblance of an electoral mandate. The much-heralded checks and balances in the American system proved much less inhibiting than might have been expected. The Bush years have also produced equally striking changes in process. Power has been centralized in the House of Representatives; deliberation has declined in the committees and on the floor of the House and Senate; and Congress has been uncharacteristically deferential to the executive branch. Perhaps most unsettling has been a decline of norms restraining excessive partisanship and the political manipulation of democratic rules of the game.

The Party System

How can we account for these troubling developments in American politics? The place to begin is with the contemporary U.S. party system. The political parties today bear relatively little resemblance to those of a generation ago. Democrats and Republicans are now at a position of parity; we are truly a 50-50 nation. The last presidential election ended as close to a tie as one can imagine. Party majorities in the House and Senate have been historically narrow. The two parties control roughly the same number of state legislative chambers and seats. And the public itself is evenly divided in its partisan attachments.

The two major parties are now much more ideologically polarized than in earlier decades. The civil rights legislation of 1964 and 1965 set in motion a dynamic process of political change that has led voters, activists, and elected officials to sort themselves into party by their ideology. The once commonplace conservative Democrats and liberal Republicans have all but disappeared. States, counties, and legislative districts have become more socially and politically homogeneous, producing natural breeding grounds for electorally-safe politicians who espouse their parties' distinctive ideology. The philosophical overlap between party delegations in both the House and the Senate has almost entirely vanished, leaving few members in the political center.

This in turn has produced a period of remarkable party unity in Congress. On the central issues that divide the parties, Republican and Democrats vote as party loyalists, partly because

of shared ideologies, partly because of shared political fates. With majority status hanging on a handful of seats in both chambers, members of Congress tempted to stray on key votes are under enormous pressure to toe the party line. Interactions between the parties have become bitterly competitive.

The increasing importance of party is evident in mass, as well as elite, opinion. Party identification dominantly shapes one's preferences between candidates, evaluations of the performance of the president and Congress, positions on issues, and even perceptions of reality. For example, Republicans today believe that the economy is strong and that the war in Iraq is going well; Democrats have a radically different view of both. These polarized views between Democrats and Republicans in the electorate are reinforced by open partisan combat within Congress and along Pennsylvania Avenue, which is waged in the form of a permanent campaign.

The Bush Presidency

George W. Bush inherited this world of party polarization when he moved into the White House in January 2001, but he also contributed to it. In spite of their threadbare electoral victory (losing seats in the House and Senate as well as the popular vote in the presidential election), Republicans enjoyed their first unified party government since the Eisenhower days. From the outset, Bush and Republican leaders in Congress demonstrated they intended to make the most of it. No trimming the platform in light of the election results, no unusual efforts to reach across the aisle to lower the partisan fever. The President played hard ball with his tax cut proposal and won most of what he wanted. Even when, following Bush's tax cut victory, Senator Jim Jeffords of Vermont bolted the Republican party, giving the Democrats control of the Senate, Bush did not shrink from his conservative platform.

The President quickly demonstrated it would be unwise to underestimate him. He is enormously ambitious and focused intently on accomplishing his policy and political objectives. Bush reveals few signs of a capacious curiosity about ideas and policies or appetite for neutral policy analysis, but he relishes bold, decisive, risk-tolerant leadership. He has also proven himself to be a very skillful and tough-minded politician. No clearer example exists than his bare-knuckles use of the homeland security issue to produce a highly

unusual pickup of seats in the 2002 midterm elections.

Determined not to repeat what he clearly believes was a critical mistake made by his father – venturing from his conservative political base – George W. Bush embraced a strategy that virtually guaranteed an exacerbation of the partisan polarization he inherited. After a brief period of national unity following the attacks of September 11 (which saw his approval ratings soar from 50 to 90 percent), the President reverted to bold and contentious policies and hard-nosed strategies for achieving them. Most fateful, of course, was his decision to lead the nation into war in Iraq. Mobilizing the domestic support needed to wage an elective war, Bush demonstrated what presidents can accomplish with pure force of will. Indeed, reviewing the domestic and foreign policy achievements of his first term, one is led to conclude that he made more (i.e. radical policy departures) out of less (the absence of any electoral mandate) of any president in modern history.

But politics and governance are about more than a president's batting average in achieving his policy objectives. What matters are the consequences of those policies and the real-world conditions that citizens confront as election day approaches. President Bush's bold political achievements have not been matched by clear progress on the problems the nation faced.

- Taking the war on terrorism to Afghanistan and Iraq has proven much more problematic than anticipated. While the Taliban regime and Al Qaeda were quickly routed in Afghanistan, Osama Bin Laden escaped in Tora Bora, and remnants of both groups continue to operate in Afghanistan and western Pakistan. A rapid military victory in Iraq was followed by an unanticipated and lethal insurgency, producing much bloodshed, chaos, insecurity, and delays in restoring essential services and a functioning economy. The Administration is vulnerable on its primary rationale for the war (WMDs and Saddam Hussein's links to Al Qaeda, both rebutted by evidence), inadequate planning to win the peace, and incompetent management of postwar operations. Most Americans now believe the costs of the war in Iraq exceed the benefits, and that we are more, not less, vulnerable to terrorism as a consequence of it.

- The extraordinary stimulus from a series of tax cuts, major spending increases, and an accommodative monetary policy has not produced the expected robust economic recovery from the 2001 recession. The economy has produced fewer jobs than it has lost since January 2001, wage gains have been stagnant, and high health care and energy costs have squeezed middle-class households. Moreover, federal budget surpluses generated at the end of the Clinton administration have turned into huge deficits almost certain to extend into the baby-boomer retirement years.
- The President's signature domestic policy achievements – the No Child Left Behind education law and the Medicare prescription drug bill – have both generated more skepticism and complaints than political reward.
- Finally, the President's promise to be a “uniter, not a divider” has proven empty. If anything, our political culture has become more, not less, coarse since he took office.

The 2004 Elections

Presidential elections featuring incumbents seeking re-election are typically referendums on the country's performance during that incumbent's tenure in office. President Bush fully expected to run as a successful commander-in-chief in the war against terrorism and as a strong leader who, with bold tax cuts, turned around an economy weakened by 9/11 and corporate scandals. By the spring of 2004 it became clear that a retrospective judgment on the President's performance was no guaranteed route to victory. The public was pessimistic about the direction the country had taken at home and abroad and was in the market for change. Conditions in Iraq continued to deteriorate. The anticipated election-year economic recovery proved less broad-based and sustained than previous recoveries.

Moreover, Democrats avoided nominating their potentially weakest candidate – Howard Dean – and quickly rallied behind John Kerry. Money flowed into the Kerry campaign and Democratic Party coffers, equalizing what observers had expected would be a huge Bush advantage. Democrats were unified and energized, concentrating all of their rhetorical fire on the incumbent president.

The Bush campaign responded with a three-prong strategy. First, reduce the political fallout from Iraq by moving forward with a transfer of sovereignty to the Iraqis and a more rapid replacement of American troops in urban areas of insurgent strength with newly trained Iraqi forces. Second, elevate the salience of terrorism as the overriding threat to American security. And third, define Kerry as unfit to be president, based on his alleged inconsistent record on national security matters and his liberal positions and votes on economic and domestic policy.

That strategy bore fruit in August and the first part of September, with the help of the Swift Boat Veterans for Truth, a well-staged Republican convention, and Kerry's defensiveness and incoherence on Iraq. What had been a modest Kerry lead in the horse race turned into a Bush lead (though its size varied greatly across polling organizations). Kerry's standing with the public declined during this period, but the underlying public dissatisfaction with the situation in Iraq and the economy did not diminish. The structural forces working against the re-election of the President remain very much in place. The central question is how will the remaining weeks of the campaign and the electoral calculation of the remaining uncommitted voters be framed? Will Senator Kerry succeed in returning the focus to an assessment of the country's performance under President Bush's leadership? Or will Bush succeed in keeping public attention on Kerry and his unsuitability for office. In the first instance, Bush is likely to lose; in the second, he has a good chance of winning.

The debates will provide Senator Kerry an opportunity analogous to that afforded Ronald Reagan in his only debate with President Jimmy Carter in 1980. Reagan seized that opportunity to persuade voters that he was a perfectly acceptable alternative to Carter. Reagan also succeeded in framing the choice as a referendum on the President's performance: "Are you better off than you were four years ago?" If Kerry emerges from the debates having passed the threshold of acceptability as a potential president and having refocused public attention on conditions in Iraq and the domestic economy, he will be well on his way to victory in November. Of course, events could intercede to disrupt this dynamic. Pundits always imagine an "October surprise." By their very nature, however, surprises cannot be anticipated. The safest

bet is to assume the dynamic consistent with the underlying forces in the election and reinforced by the campaign will continue to Election Day.

The outcome of the presidential contest may well determine which party controls the Senate. Ten hotly contested races are being fought primarily in Republican states, giving the GOP a clear advantage. But Democrats have a shot at winning three Republican seats and holding most of their vulnerable open seats in the South. If Kerry wins comfortably, several contests are likely to tip to the Democrats, which would be sufficient for them to reclaim the Senate majority in the new Congress. On the other hand, if Bush is re-elected, Republicans are very likely to hold and even marginally increase their majority.

The dearth of competitive seats – barely three dozen out of 435 – works against Democratic hopes of returning to the majority in the House after a decade in the minority. Picking up the necessary dozen seats probably requires a Kerry landslide, an unlikely outcome. A modest victory by either Kerry or Bush is likely to be accompanied by little change in the current partisan division in the House.

In sum, look for little in the way of a decisive electoral mandate. Our 50/50 nation will continue whoever wins the presidency. The next president will be fortunate to win by two or three percentage points of the popular vote and a comfortable majority in the Electoral College. (Another dead-heat election would put enormous strains on our system for resolving disputed state results and would threaten the legitimacy of our electoral system.) Both Senate and House will be led by very narrow majorities. Partisan conflict and bitterness are unlikely to dissipate. Governing after the election will be exceedingly difficult.

Governing After the Election

The absence of a decisive victory for one party or the other will be one major constraint on the president inaugurated in January. Even more formidable will be the policy inheritance of the new Administration. On the domestic side, huge budget and current account deficits, historically low federal revenues as a share of GDP, the approaching retirement of the baby-boomer generation, health care cost inflation, and escalating spending pres-

sure for homeland security and defense will handcuff a president hoping to pursue new policy initiatives. With respect to foreign policy, finishing the job in Iraq well enough to reduce the U.S. commitment provides a daunting challenge. Preventing a relapse of Afghanistan to a haven for terrorists is no easy task. Then there are the North Korean and Iranian nuclear threats, the insecurity of WMDs in the former Soviet Union and elsewhere, the challenge of confronting and diminishing the threats from radical Islam, increased tensions in the Taiwan Straits, and the extraordinary unpopularity of America on the streets of most every country in the world. Coping with these security challenges will perforce curtail the international ambitions of the next president.

Neither presidential candidate has used the campaign to develop a realistic plan for governing. President Bush is perhaps most vulnerable on this count. He is espousing an ownership society at home, but by making his tax cuts permanent would starve the federal treasury of the funds needed to launch such an ambitious enterprise. He also champions the promotion of liberty and democracy abroad as his ultimate weapon of mass destruction against terrorism. Yet the setbacks and costs of the Iraq enterprise have greatly weakened prospects for succeeding with such an ambitious, some say utopian, approach.

Senator Kerry has constrained his ability to pursue high-priority policies, such as increasing health insurance coverage, fully funding federal education programs, and reducing the deficit, by promising to make permanent all of the Bush tax cuts affecting ninety-eight percent of households. And he, like President Bush, has had virtually nothing to say about the policy choices we will confront in coping with the escalating costs of Social Security and Medicare that lie just over the horizon. Moreover, Kerry's plan for making the best of a bad situation in Iraq cannot prevent the very difficult choices that will have to be made.

This is not to deny that 2004 is a very high-stakes election. The candidates and parties have profoundly different philosophies, values, and policy preferences; who governs after the election will matter in myriad ways – including judicial appointments, administrative directives, foreign policy approaches, and the use of the bully pulpit to shape the policy agenda. Nonetheless, either Kerry or Bush will be forced to operate on a path set by President

Bush in the wake of the controversial 2000 election. Historians are likely to see the latter election as the most pivotal. It will take years, if not decades, to cope with the consequences of Bush's high-stakes decisions: to cut taxes again and again and to wage a war in Iraq.

As for the approaching November election, perhaps we should pray for two things: a decisive outcome in the presidential race that will spare us the agony of another November 2000 and a divided party government that will force the president and both parties in Congress to engage in genuine deliberation, negotiation, and compromise somewhere near the political center.

