

Vote of Confidence

By *Karlyn Bowman*



White House photo by Eric Draper

In his review of two books on the aftermath of the 2000 election, *New York Times* managing editor Michael Oreskes observed that “the remarkable thing about last year’s election for president is not how close it was but how little Americans seemed to care about it at the time. Nothing much seemed to be at stake...”

“The election did not matter,” he continued, “The candidates were forgettable.”

This interpretation of public reaction to the election is not supported by

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survey data. Many polls conducted before and after the vote suggest that most Americans were satisfied with George W. Bush and Al Gore as candidates and confident that the country would be in good hands if either man were elected.

In January 2000, at the beginning of the primary season, three-quarters of those surveyed by Gallup/CNN/*USA Today* believed there was a candidate in the race who would make a good president, up from 40% who thought so in 1992. Majorities told Gallup they would be proud to have either Bush or Gore as president. Identical numbers told Yankelovich interviewers that both men had strong moral characters. And more than 60% in another Gallup poll said that both were honest and trustworthy.

After the conventions, when Americans had their first sustained look at the candidates, they told Gallup that both men were strong and decisive leaders. Although during the early months of the campaign more people thought Gore had the right kind of experience to be president than felt that way about Bush, by the end people felt both Bush and Gore were up to the job.

The polling evidence around the time of the election found the public continuing to view the candidates in positive terms. Immediately after the vote, when there was no clear winner, 69% of respondents to a NBC News/*Wall Street Journal* poll said they would be comfortable with Bush (and 66% with Gore), and they were prepared to support him as our new president. These findings may explain the public’s mea-

sured reaction to the 36-day whirlwind that struck after November 7.

At no time in the aftermath of the election did a majority (or even a plurality) of those surveyed believe the situation was a constitutional crisis. Messy and difficult, yes; a crisis, no.

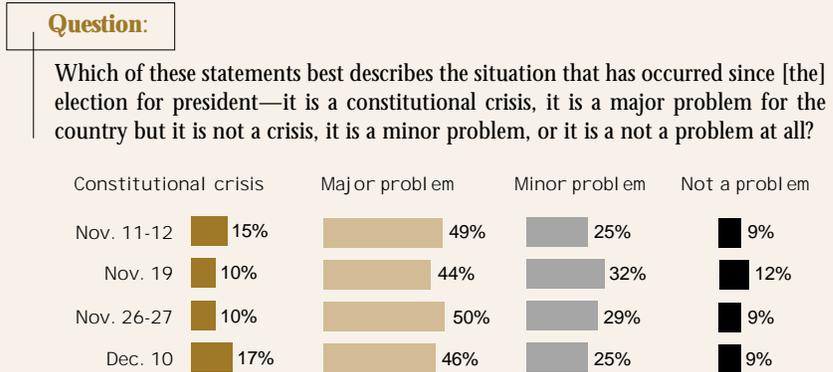
In four polls conducted between November 11 and December 10, 2000 by Gallup/CNN/*USA Today*, no more than 17% ever described the situation as a crisis (see Figure 1).

When asked by NBC News/*Wall Street Journal* interviewers on November 13 whether they thought the situation would be resolved before it turned into a constitutional crisis, a solid majority, 56%, said that it would. Even after the election controversy had dragged on for three more weeks, a plurality, 46%, gave that response. Only 15% in that December 7-10 poll called it a crisis.

One reason for the public's composure may have been its high level of confidence in the Supreme Court. In June 2000, 47% told Gallup interviewers that they had a great deal or quite a lot of confidence in the Court, with 35% expressing some confidence. In mid-December, those percentages were 49% and 31% respectively, with 19% saying they had very little or no confidence. When Gallup repeated this question in June 2001, the numbers were virtually identical.

Thirty-four percent expressed a great deal of confidence in the people running the Supreme Court in Harris Interactive's January 2000 measure; in January 2001, 35% did. Fifty-eight percent in a December 10 ABC News/*Washington Post* poll told interviewers that their opinion of the Supreme Court had not changed "as a result of its order stopping the recount;" 15% said they now had a

Figure 1
The Public Maintains Its Composure



Source: Surveys by Gallup/CNN/*USA Today*, latest that of December 10, 2000.

higher opinion of the Court than they'd had before, and 25% a lower one. A majority of Americans in a December 13 Gallup poll believed the justices who had voted to end the recount had based their decisions mostly on the legal merits of the case; 35% thought they'd based them mostly on their own desire to have Bush as president.

Post-election polls also suggest that Americans made a distinction between the legitimacy of the Bush presidency and that of the election procedures and standards. In five identical questions asked by Gallup/CNN/*USA Today* between November 11 and December 13, around 80% said that if Bush were declared the winner and inaugurated in January, they would accept him as the legitimate president. Slightly smaller majorities responded that way about Gore.

Another Gallup question that was asked five times between December 15, 2000 and November 2001 gave people three possible responses. While between 15 and 24% said that Bush had stolen the election, about 30% said he had won (though only on a technicality), and around 50% in each poll said that he had won fair and square. Overall, these results suggest broad acceptance of a Bush presidency.

When asked explicitly whether they thought Bush was legitimately elected as the 43rd president, far fewer Americans, but still a majority in nearly all cases, believed he was. Between 51 and 56% said so in response to four questions asked by CBS News/*New York Times* interviewers between mid-December 2000 and early March 2001. And in a poll conducted December 14-15 by ABC News/*Washington Post*, 55% agreed.

Moreover, Floridians made the same judgment as the one reached nationally. In Mason-Dixon's polling in Florida in February 2001, self-identified voters said the election process in their state was fair by a margin of 57% to 36%, although they were evenly split over whether the certified results were accurate.

Recognizing the president as legitimately elected is not the same as according him a mandate, and after Gore's December 13 concession speech, many observers suggested that in light of the closeness of the contest, Bush should scale back his plans for the country. But the public never agreed with that perspective.

In identical questions asked by *Newsweek* in early November and December, around 80% said that "who-

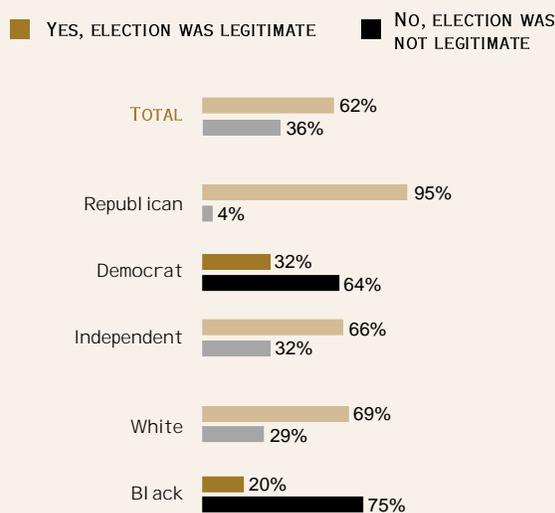
Has the Country Moved On?

Prominent among those who were displeased with the mechanics and the outcome of the 2000 election were African Americans, who comprise one of the Democratic party's most loyal constituencies, and Democrats themselves. Four months after Gore's concession, three-quarters of African Americans told ABC News/Washington Post interviewers that Bush had not been legitimately elected. Sixty-four percent of Democrats gave that response. In a question asked by Gallup/CNN/USA Today interviewers in July, however, a bare majority, 51%, of Democrats said they accepted Bush as the legitimate president. Just a third of African Americans said they did.

Polls conducted since September 11 show that most Americans believe the terrorist attacks brought the country closer together. And, indeed, substantial majorities of Americans, including many who disapproved of him in the past, now say that they approve of the job George W. Bush is doing as President. This is a way of showing solidarity in a time of war. What we can't know at this point is how long that support will last and whether it will dissolve the dissatisfaction some felt about the process that made Bush president.

Question:

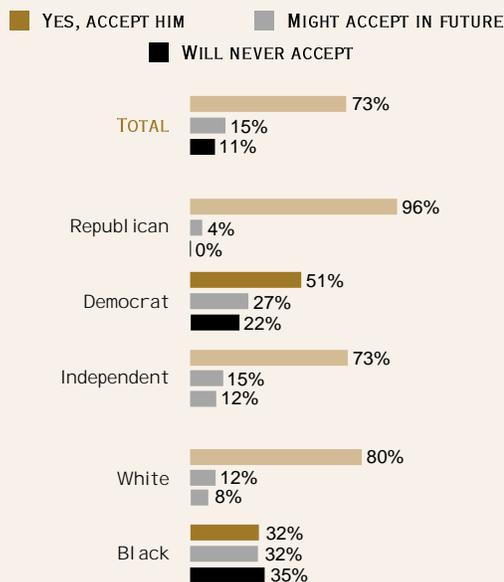
Do you consider George W. Bush to have been legitimately elected as president, or not?



Source: Survey by ABC News/Washington Post, April 23, 2001.

Question:

...[W]hich of the following describes your view of whether President Bush is a legitimate president? I accept him as the legitimate president; I don't accept him as the legitimate president now but might in the future; or I will never accept him as the legitimate president.



Source: Survey by Gallup/CNN/USA Today, July 10-11, 2001.

ever ends up winning" should "go ahead and pursue his plans for the country regardless of his small margin of victory." Only about 15% said he should "scale back his political agenda because of the closeness of the election."

In *Newsweek's* December 14-15 poll, people were asked whether President-

elect Bush should scale back his agenda because he had lost the popular vote nationwide and had such a narrow margin in the Electoral College. The public once again rejected the idea decisively. Seventy-three percent wanted him to "go ahead and pursue his plans for the country regardless of these factors."

An ABC News/*Washington Post* question that emphasized "compromise" produced a different result. Fifty-two percent in mid-January said Bush should compromise on things the Democrats strongly opposed, while 41% said he had a "mandate to carry out the agenda he presented during the presidential campaign." The idea

of political compromise, however, is always a winner in public opinion polls.

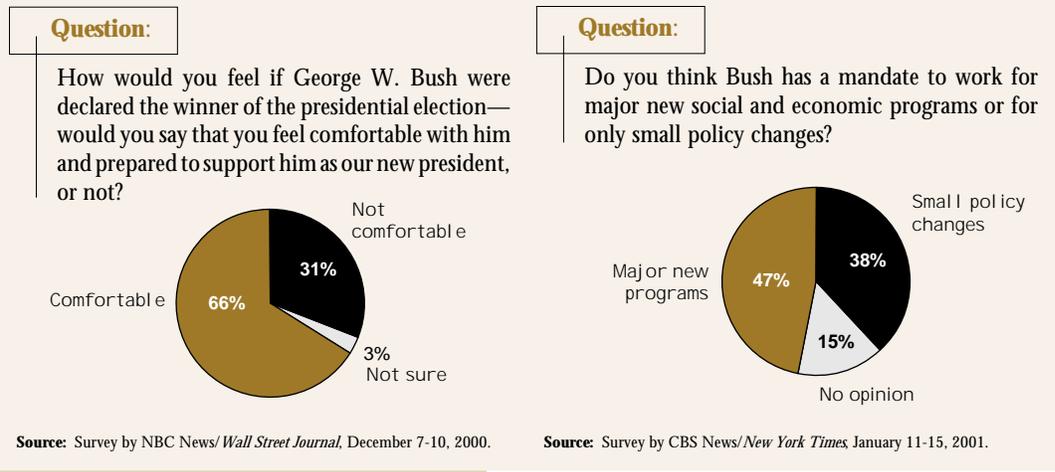
Perhaps Americans seemed to take the difficult election aftermath in stride in part because nearly all who voted thought their own ballots had been counted properly. Ninety-two percent in a December 12-

13 Zogby poll gave that response; 1% said their own votes had not been counted properly. A *Los Angeles Times* question with a slightly different emphasis found that 85% of self-identified voters had a lot of or some confidence that their votes had been counted.

Americans' coolheaded acceptance of the outcome is especially remarkable because the country remained evenly split after November 7 about its choice for president. A November 16-17 *Newsweek* poll found that 44% wanted Bush to become our new president, and 43% preferred Gore. In a December 8-10 NBC News/*Wall Street Journal* poll, 48% said they would vote for Gore if the election were rerun, while 47% were for Bush. A December 14-16 poll of national adults by CBS News/*New York Times* found that 46% wanted Bush as our next president and 41% wanted Gore.

In a December 14-16 *Los Angeles Times* poll of self-identified registered voters, 42% said Gore had shown himself to be the best man for the job, but 44% said Bush had. That poll found the electorate split on vote intention, with 46% for Gore and 45% for Bush. Even

Figure 2
Comfortable With the Mandate



a survey of non-voters conducted by the National Campaign Study Group from November 8 to December 5 found them evenly split, at 37% each. As late as July 2001, in an ABC News/*Washington Post* poll, 46% said they would vote for Gore "if the election were held today;" 48% would choose Bush.

Unlike many members of the nation's political class, most Americans' response to the 36-day imbroglio after November 7 was measured and calm. Most people were confident that the system would work. At no time did they see the situation as a crisis. Their positive views of the candidates and the Supreme Court probably enhanced their comfort level. For most Americans, the margin of victory was irrelevant after December 13. Even before Gore conceded, most said whomever was selected had a mandate to govern on his agenda.

Should any of this be surprising? The 2000 contest was, after all, the fifty-fourth consecutive election in our history in which Americans had gone to the polls freely. That accomplishment, as Everett Ladd once reminded us, is a "record of democratic participation that

is unmatched... [O]ur system of choosing our leaders works remarkably well."

Given that track record, the public's equanimity in the very difficult post-election situation is understandable. The idea that Americans didn't seem to "care" much about the outcome can be seen as a measure of confidence in the much maligned system that would ultimately determine the outcome.

In Al Gore's graceful concession speech, he reminded Americans that it was time to "recognize that that which unites us is greater than that which divides us." One suspects the American people knew that all along, and acted accordingly. ●

A review of the polls appearing in this article, along with additional data, can be found at www.aei.org/ps/psbowman6.pdf.