

Two for the Album

Parties adjust to a new politics of values



By John Kenneth White

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As we entered the 2002 congressional campaign, much had changed since George W. Bush's controversial election. The tragedies of September 11 created an enormous wealth of public goodwill toward Bush personally, and, in the days following the terrorist attacks, the president received extraordinarily high job approval ratings. On September 10, the Gallup Organization found the president's job approval at a mere 51%; three weeks later it jumped 39 points to a record-setting 90%.



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Most revealing, a July 2002 Gallup poll found the proportion of those saying they liked Bush because of his handling of the terrorist attacks equal to those who said they approved because he had good moral values (13% apiece). This is important, because political prospects today depend upon a new “politics of values,” and Republicans and Democrats need to adjust to it if either is to come out decisively ahead with the voters in November.

Given the drama of the past year, it is not surprising that Republicans hold decisive advantages on most issues tied to values. According to a June survey by the Tarrance Group and Lake Snell Perry & Associates, 53% named Bush as someone who shared their values; only 34% picked congressional Democrats.

The same survey also found majorities favoring Republicans on values issues, including promoting personal responsibility (53% to 27%); family values (48% to 32%); moral values (54% to 25%); and honesty and integrity (45% to 25%). Only when asked which party best represented the value of community were Democrats preferred (47% to 34%).

Yet even with the GOP’s decisive values advantages, the two parties were at rough parity when voters were asked to select which one shared their values: 42% said Republicans did; 40% said Democrats, according to the Tarrance survey. This is due not only to the generic Democratic advantages on the values of community and tolerance, but also because, in several fundamental ways, the nation has greatly changed.

In 1970, Richard Scammon and Ben Wattenberg wrote *The Real Majority*, which claimed that a new electoral majority had emerged that was

“unyoung, unpoor, and unblack.” That so-called “real majority” that twice elected Richard Nixon and Ronald Reagan has disappeared as the ethnic and racial makeup of the country has been vastly altered during the past decade.

Whites are no longer a majority in California, New Mexico, and Hawaii. And in the coming decade, Florida and Texas will be added to the list. Given present birth trends, it is estimated that by 2050 whites will no longer be a majority across the country.

Family life in the US is also being redefined. In 1972, nearly two-thirds of all married couples had a working husband and a wife who stayed home. By 1998, two-thirds of those who were married had both spouses with careers outside the home.

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One cultural indicator of the transformation of family life was the recent decision by *The New York Times* to include in its weddings section announcements of same-sex commitment ceremonies. According to Howell Raines, executive editor of the *Times*, the new “Weddings/Celebrations” section acknowledges “the newsworthiness of a growing and visible trend in society toward public celebrations of commitment by gay and lesbian couples—celebrations important to many of our readers, their families and their friends.”

In my freshman politics classes at the Catholic University of America, students no longer relate to old television programs that depict a Working Dad

and Stay-at-Home Mom, including classics such as *The Adventures of Ozzie and Harriet* and *Leave It to Beaver*. These young adults grew up watching programs whose premises included virtually every possible variation on the family unit. Their contemporary tastes tend more toward HBO’s *Sex and the City*, which, they say, speaks to their life circumstances.

This new picture of the American population and family has transformed the political playing field. The inability of the Republican party to parlay its traditional-values advantages into victories at the polls was evident in 2001, when Virginia and New Jersey Republicans selected as their gubernatorial nominees “morally-minded” men who rejected the libertarianism once so closely associated with the party’s forebears.

New Jersey’s Brent Schundler compared himself to Mother Teresa and the pope, and suggested that his Democratic rival’s tolerance for alternative lifestyles should be *the* campaign issue. It wasn’t, and Schundler lost by 14 percentage points.

In other places, Democrats continued to do well among college-educated, upper-class professionals, whom author-commentator David Brooks has dubbed the “bourgeois bohemians.” As John B. Judis and Ruy Teixeira point out in their new book, *The Emerging Democratic Majority*, Democrats control every major city in formerly Republican-dominated Ohio, thanks to their professional backers.

One reason for Bush's inability to translate the positive feelings most Americans have toward him into broader support for his party is that Republicans have been unable to make the necessary connections between "family values" and combating the nation's most important problems. One may admire traditional families, espouse the American Dream, and fight terrorism. Yet this hardly alleviates today's stock market woes or assures a skittish public that the economy is strong.

A September CBS News/*New York Times* poll found 49% saying the country was seriously "off on the wrong track," while 43% thought the nation was headed in the right direction. And according to pollster John Zogby, beneath the broad public support for Bush lurked an ominously low 47% who said in a July Zogby International poll that he deserved re-election.

(An axiom of politics has it that whenever an incumbent falls below 50% on this question, that person is in jeopardy; another question, posed by Ipsos-Reid for *The Cook Political Report* in August, found 56% saying they would definitely vote or would consider voting for someone else.)

The political perils Bush faces are clear, as evidenced by the willingness of so many Democrats to take him on in 2004, and public queasiness over impending war with Iraq. As Zogby puts it, "Here is a president who was elected with only 48% of the popular vote and more than one and a half years later, even in a time of war, remains stuck in that position."

Dissatisfaction with other incumbents is also spreading: in July, 42% wanted to elect someone new to Congress; 41% preferred to stick with the status quo, according to a poll conducted by

Public Opinion Strategies for Greenberg, Quinlan, Rosner Research.

Certainly, these low reelect numbers are fueled by the economy's lackluster performance. But anti-incumbent sentiments have also gathered steam because the time-honored traditions of loyalty, fidelity, and responsibility are seen as sorely lacking among those in high places.



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More than ever before, voters want institutions, parties, and candidates who will uphold the values of honor, responsibility, loyalty, and hard work. But George W. Bush's own brand of values politics is having only a limited impact. While many Republican officeholders admire Bush's unique ability to connect with voters using the mantra of "compassionate conservatism," most view his rhetoric as an election tactic rather than a strategy for governance. Thus, Bush's values legacy is likely to be diminished.

This legacy is also being defined by two very different portraits that are emerging of the forty-third president. Back in the days when people got their news from the print media, Clare Booth Luce famously said that all presidents got one line in the history books. For George Washington it was, "He was the father of our country." Abraham Lincoln's sentence was equally succinct: "He saved the Union and freed

the slaves.” Franklin Roosevelt’s line was, “He launched the New Deal and fought World War II.”

But in the present age, when voters remember their leaders by their performances on television, presidents don’t get just a line in the history books; they get two, often contrasting, images that most citizens remember. One image of John F. Kennedy is of the young man admonishing his fellow Americans to “Ask not, what your country can do for you; ask what you can do for your country.” The other is of Kennedy’s gory assassination in Dallas.

Lyndon B. Johnson came to Congress following JFK’s death and used Martin Luther King’s slogan, “We shall overcome,” when speaking about civil rights. Four years later, that picture had been replaced by an aged Johnson who went on television and announced he would not seek re-election.

Richard M. Nixon’s televised photos are those of the resurrected candidate in 1968 asking the country’s youth to lower their voices, and of a beleaguered president announcing his resignation while young people (their voices still in full-throated cry) shouted, “Jail to the Chief!”

For Ronald Reagan, we see a president exhibiting grace under pressure after an unsuccessful assassination attempt (“Honey, I forgot to duck”), and a bewildered, aged man who could not recall key events of the Iran-Contra affair.

Bill Clinton’s photos are those of the 1992 winner proclaiming, “It’s the economy stupid!,” and the angry man who eight years later denied having sex with “that woman.”

At the midpoint of his presidency, two different photographs of George W. Bush are coming into focus: one is the picture of the president grabbing a bullhorn at Ground Zero and telling rescue workers the US would exact revenge on Osama bin Laden. The other is of Bush addressing Wall Street executives on the need for



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corporate responsibility while television’s news channels show a plummeting Dow Jones index.

These two photographs have resulted in diametrically opposite poll results. When it comes to the campaign against terrorism, a September CBS News/*New York Times* poll showed those who approved Bush’s performance outnumbering dissenters by a whopping 41 percentage points. However, when asked about Bush’s handling of the economy, those approving outnumbered the naysayers by just 5 points.

Bush’s second photo creates an opportunity for Democrats, but it may not be enough. The party still has the same problems when it comes to values issues that it did in 2000 among white men, rural voters, and those who work in low-skill jobs. In July 2000, a CBS/*New York Times* poll gave the Republicans a 23-point advantage over the Democrats as the party that better upheld traditional family values, a 15-point edge when it came to knowing right from wrong, and a 9-point lead on protecting religious values. An NBC News/*Wall Street Journal* survey taken a month later showed 66% saying Republicans stood for strong moral values, while only 44% said the same about the Democrats.

To be sure, voters have been affected by the faltering economy—especially the recent precipitous declines in the stock market. A poll for Public Opinion Strategies showed that 74% of respondents had invested in Wall Street or had retirement accounts, and 42% reported losing money in the market this year. Some think these investors may tilt to the Democrats in November after third-quarter 401K statements arrive in the mail—and they may be right.

But, that said, there remains a virtual deadlock in the generic party vote, and incumbents from both parties seem particularly vulnerable this year. A September poll by Zogby for MSNBC found a surprising softness in support for candidates seeking re-election in 10 key states.

The tiebreaker may lie in the new politics of values, but the continuing partisan stalemate suggests that neither party has been able to take it and remold it into a majority. ●