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According to the *Los Angeles Times* 2000 national exit poll, moral and ethical values ranked first among 11 issues affecting presidential vote choice. George W. Bush led Al Gore by more than three to one among those who said moral and ethical values were one of the two most important issues in deciding their vote. Clearly, a group of “moral-values voters” has emerged that focuses on a certain set of value-oriented issues important in their voting decisions. And the moral values story is made more complex by differing opinions between demographic groups in American society.

What are moral issues for voters? And who are these “moral-values voters”?

To find out, *The Washington Post*, Henry J. Kaiser Family Foundation, and Harvard University conducted a survey of registered voters in September 2000 on moral values issues in the 2000 presidential election.

Voting Values

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First, we constructed a list of 12 issues that have been mentioned as moral issues in the press and asked registered voters whether or not they thought of each one as a moral issue, that is, whether each involved their beliefs about what is morally right and wrong (see Figure 1). Majorities named nine of these as moral issues, with over two-thirds citing the break-up of the family (76%), sex and violence in the media (74%), the example a president sets by his personal behavior (73%), and abortion (70%). Only three of the topics were not considered moral issues by a majority of registered voters. All had to do in some way with equity or income redistribution: income differences between high and low income people, taxes and the tax system, and campaign finance reform.

To determine whether these moral issues actually resonate as voting issues, we asked those who said that an item was a moral issue whether or not it would be one of the most important issues in deciding their vote for president. On only one item—expanding health care coverage to all Americans—did a majority (53%) say it was both a moral issue and one of the most important issues in deciding their vote.

Six other issues met these two criteria for more than one-third of registered voters. Several issues seen as having an important moral



The White House



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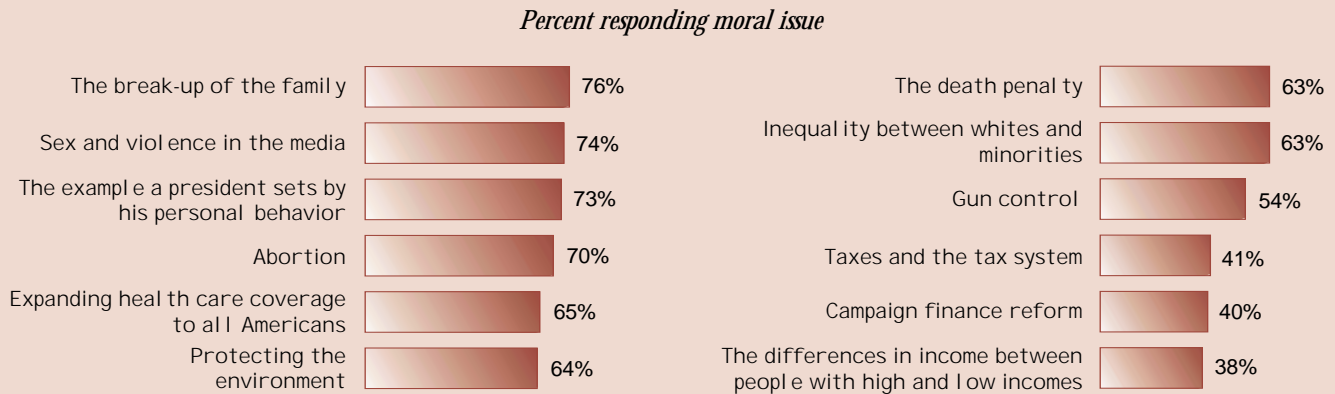
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Figure 1

Moral is in the Eye of the Beholder

Question: Now I'm going to read you a list of issues. For each one, please tell me whether you think of it as a "moral" issue involving your beliefs about what is morally right and wrong, or you don't think of it as a moral issue. How about...?



Note: Responses of registered voters.

Source: Survey by *The Washington Post*/Kaiser Family Foundation/Harvard University, September 7-17, 2000.

component were clearly not considered key voting issues, at least not in this particular election. The dropoff was especially large for the break-up of the family, the death penalty, and sex and violence in the media.

Seventeen percent of registered voters in the Kaiser survey said that "moral values" comprised one of the two most important issues in deciding their presidential vote. Our "moral-values voters" were a smaller group than the 35% found in the *LA Times* exit poll, probably because the *Times*' broader term, "moral/ethical values," attracted voters who were concerned about campaign finance and the character of public officials.

In our survey, a majority of "moral-values voters" named four issues as being both moral issues and one of the most important issues in deciding their vote: the example a president sets by his personal behavior (75%), abortion (58%), the break-up of the family (57%), and sex and violence in the media (53%). "Moral-values voters" were far less interested

than other registered voters in expanding health care coverage and protecting the environment.

As both the *LA Times* exit poll and our own survey show, "moral-values voters" have become a significant part of the Republican electorate. In the exit poll, 55% of Bush voters named "moral/ethical values" as one of the two most important issues in deciding their vote, compared with only 17% of Gore voters. "Moral-values voters" made up 30% of self-described Republicans in our survey, compared with only 8% of Democrats. These voters have captured the "moral-values" label and emphasized a particular set of voting concerns, but other moral values are considered important by those who do not call themselves "moral-values voters."

For instance, Democrats are significantly more likely than Republicans to name expanding health care coverage, gun control, and protecting the environment as moral issues important in deciding their vote. In addition, Democrats are far more likely than Republi-

cans to be concerned about racial inequality and economic redistribution as moral issues.

To examine in more detail the differences among various groups, we organized the moral values in our survey into four categories, or domains. These pertained to family values, traditional moral values, religion in public life, and equality and income redistribution.

Differences between Republicans and Democrats were apparent in each of the four domains. Republicans were significantly more likely than Democrats to take "traditional" views on six of seven measures in the areas of family values and traditional moral values (see Table 1). On four of these six values, the majority of Republicans and Democrats agreed, muting the electoral effect. But on two others, the parties differed. About three-fourths of Republicans disagreed with the statement, "The world is always changing and we should adjust our moral values to those changes"; Democrats were as likely to agree as disagree. Six in 10 Republi-

Table 1

Values Differ by Partisanship

Family Values

	Percent agreeing				Percent disagreeing		
	Total	Party ID			Total	Party ID	
		Rep.	Dem.			Rep.	Dem.
Better if mother could stay home, take care of house and children	79%	88%	72%	Unhappy couple should get divorced even if they have young children	48%	59%	46%
Husband should have final say	13	18	14				

Traditional Moral Values

	Percent agreeing				Percent disagreeing		
	Total	Party ID			Total	Party ID	
		Rep.	Dem.			Rep.	Dem.
We're too tolerant of behaviors considered immoral/wrong in the past	70%	81%	64%	World is changing, we should adjust our morals and values	60%	74%	47%
More worried that country will become too tolerant of behaviors that are bad for society	60	76	54	We should be more tolerant of people who live by their own moral standards even if we think they're wrong	26	36	19

Religion in Public Life

	Percent agreeing		
	Total	Party ID	
		Rep.	Dem.
To improve values/morality in this country, must put emphasis on religion	45%	56%	41%
Prefer to see religious/spiritual values have greater role in politics and public life	37	49	30

Equality/Redistribution

	Percent agreeing		
	Total	Party ID	
		Rep.	Dem.
We have gone too far in pushing equal rights in this country	39%	54%	25%
Distribution of wealth in this country is fair ¹	32	53	20

¹Item from a survey by *The Washington Post*/Kaiser Family Foundation/Harvard University, October 12-19, 2000.

Note: Responses of registered voters. Data compiled from multiple questions.

Source: Survey by *The Washington Post*/Kaiser Family Foundation/Harvard University, September 7-17, 2000.

cans disagreed that an unhappy couple should get divorced even if they have young children, while Democrats were slightly more likely to agree than disagree (51% to 46%).

On five measures of values concerning religion in public life, Republicans were significantly more likely than Democrats to believe that religion should be more involved. Majorities of the two groups took opposite sides on whether an emphasis on religion is necessary to improve the country's values and morality: 56% of Republicans said it is, 57% of Democrats said it is not. On

three items, a majority of one party held one view, while the other party was evenly divided.

Differences between Republicans and Democrats were particularly large in the area of equality and income redistribution. On each measure, the two groups differed significantly in their beliefs. A majority of Republicans (compared with only 20 to 25% of the Democrats) believe that we have gone too far in pushing equal rights in this country; that it is not the responsibility of government to improve living standards, that people should take care of themselves; and that the distribution

of wealth in this country is fair. Similarly, in an October 2000 survey by *Washington Post*/Kaiser/Harvard, 59% of Democratic and only 24% of Republican registered voters said that reducing the gap between the rich and poor was very important in deciding their vote for president.

There is more to the moral values story than divisions between Republicans and Democrats, though. Examination of the same four moral value domains also reveals significant differences among demographic groups within American society.

In the family values domain, differences by religiosity are prominent, with highly religious registered voters significantly more likely than the less religious to take “traditional” positions. The “high” and “low” religiosity groups took different sides on the question of whether or not an unhappy couple should get divorced even if they have young children: 54% of the highly religious said no, while 55% of the less religious said yes. Interestingly, men were significantly more likely than women to oppose divorce in this circumstance.

Similarly, on measures of moral traditionalism, highly religious respondents were significantly more likely than their less religious counterparts to take “traditional” positions. Further, whites and African Americans differed significantly, and took opposite sides, when asked if they agreed or disagreed that the world is always changing, and we should adjust our morals and values: 54% of African Americans agreed, while 63% of whites disagreed. Whites and African Americans did not differ on other measures of moral traditionalism.

Not surprisingly, differences by religiosity were quite large when it came to values concerning religion in public life. More interesting were the differences by race, with African Americans significantly more likely than whites to favor more involvement of religion in public life. Two-thirds (69%) of African Americans believe that to improve values and morality in this country, we need to put more emphasis on religion; only 44% of whites share that view. Similarly, 62% of African Americans prefer a president who often talks publicly about his religious beliefs, compared with only 41% of whites. Two-thirds of African Americans, compared with about half of whites, think it is important for organized religious groups to stand up for their beliefs in politics.

A majority (55%) of registered voters aged 65 and over believes we need to emphasize religion in order to improve the values and morality of this country; only 37% of those under 30 share that view.

Race, and to a lesser degree income and gender, were important factors in views concerning equality and income redistribution. Generally, African Americans were more likely than whites to value equality and redistribution of wealth. Only about one in ten African Americans believes that the distribution of wealth in this country is fair (10%, compared with 35% of whites) and that we have gone too far in pushing equal rights (13%, compared with 41% of whites). More than two-thirds of African American registered voters (69%, compared with 40% of whites) said in October 2000 that reducing the gap between the rich and the poor was very important in deciding their presidential vote.

Because this values domain involves income inequality and redistribution, we decided to look at income as a factor as well. Those registered voters with household incomes less than \$30,000 a year differed significantly from those with incomes of \$50,000 and over on three measures, but, interestingly they did not on the issue of pushing for equal rights. Registered voters from low-income households were far less likely than their higher-income counterparts (17% to 43%) to think the distribution of wealth is fair. In October 2000, they were also far more likely (59% to 35%) to say that reducing the gap between the rich and the poor was a very important issue in their vote.

Gender, too, plays a role in this domain, with men and women differing significantly. Women were less likely than men (24% to 40%) to believe that the distribution of wealth in this coun-

try is fair, and more likely to say that reducing the gap between rich and poor is important in deciding their vote (50% to 38%). This is one values domain where religiosity does not seem to play an important role.

The 2000 presidential election may mark the high point for voters’ concerns about the moral values issue in making electoral judgments. American politics today is being driven by concerns about moral values but, with the exception of African Americans and women, not by concerns about economic inequities.

In general, those registered voters who are more religious are far more likely to take the “traditional” side in the moral values debate than those who are less religious. James D. Hunter has argued that there is a moral coalition of highly religious people—cutting across religious preferences—who advance traditionalist policies, and this coalition has generally been joining the Republican Party. White Republicans today are significantly more likely than white Democrats to be highly religious and, as we have seen, to hold more traditionalist values. In our survey, these religious convictions figured in the areas of family values, traditional moral values, and religion in public life, but they did not come into play in the matter of promoting equity in our society.

The country is deeply divided by party over the moral values issue, broadly defined. On more than half of the measures of moral values in our analysis, there were fundamental differences between Republican and Democratic registered voters. But in fact the picture is more complex. Party differences reflect other major divisions in our society, not only by religiosity, but also by gender and race. ●