

The continuing debate on why Al Gore lost

By Sheldon Appleton

It took 36 days to decide the 2000 presidential election, but it's beginning to look like the scholarly controversy over why Al Gore lost may never end. Even the Democratic running mates have joined the argument. When Joe Lieberman told the Democratic Leadership Council in New York this summer that the populist emphasis of the Gore campaign might have failed to attract independent swing voters, Gore replied in an op-ed piece in *The New York Times* that "Standing up for 'the people versus the powerful' was the right choice in 2000." Those who suggested otherwise, he added, were wrong both politically and in principle.



News-makers

Fate or Suicide?



News-makers

These quarrels about the past may prefigure the dialogue to come about what strategies—and therefore what candidates—the Democratic Party should embrace in the future, particularly in 2004. Similarly, a close analysis of the outcomes of this year's congressional races will certainly color the strategic decisions of Democratic candidates during the 2004 campaign.

Nobody doubts that Gore could have won if he had run a better campaign—or, for that matter, that a better campaign by George W. Bush could have spared Bush the need to be rescued by a 5 to 4 decision of the US Supreme Court. A shift of less than two-thirds of 1% of the votes cast in New Hampshire would have

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given Gore an electoral vote majority even without Florida, while a shift of less than one-half of 1% each in Iowa, New Mexico, Oregon and Wisconsin could have provided Bush with a Florida-proof electoral college majority. In an election that close, almost anything could have turned the outcome either way. In Palm Beach County, almost anything did!

The main focus of the controversy, then, is not whether Gore made mistakes—neither candidate ran a perfect campaign—but what those mistakes were.

The first data available for analysis after the election were the exit polls—especially the Voter News Service (VNS) exit polls, whose role in network election-night calls of winners was so controversial. As data sources, exit polls have the advantage that they are available quickly, interview large enough samples to facilitate the study of small subgroups of voters, eliminate the guesswork about who actually voted, and probably minimize non-response. However, they ask fewer questions than other polls, depend on recollection about changes in vote intention, miss absentee- and non-voters, and are subject to respondent selection problems.

Later, scholars were able to use the National Election Study (NES), run by the University of Michigan. The NES has been the survey most frequently drawn upon by political scientists over the past half century.

Panel studies like the NES ask a large number of carefully constructed questions—many of them identical with

questions asked in past elections—and can actually trace the changing views of individual respondents. But they generally interview much smaller samples than the VNS, risk influencing panelists' later responses—due to the experience of previous interviews and the expectations of future ones—and are dependent on people's claims as to whether they have voted.

Seventy-two percent of the 2000 NES sample, for instance, claimed to have cast a presidential ballot, while in fact only 51 to 53% of adult Americans actually voted. This means that perhaps one-fifth of those whose voting decisions were analyzed—and probably a larger percentage of those whose votes were up for grabs during the campaign—never really voted at all. Of the almost 1,100 NES respondents who reported voting, just over 50% said they voted for Gore, just under 46% for Bush. (Some 49% of the VNS

When that victory did not materialize, some of the modelers maintained that the fault lay with the Gore campaign. A number of those relying primarily on surveys agreed, though a few were scornful of modelers who blamed the candidate for not fitting their models. In their book, *The Perfect Tie*, James Ceaser and Andrew Busch twitted the “members of this Blame Al Gore (BAG) school... who... conclude that because the models are right, the candidate must be wrong.”

In fact, however, a number of the modelers have tried to understand why their predictions failed, and thus have arrived at some appraisal of Gore's campaign performance. Larry Bartels and John Zaller, leading off a post-election symposium in *PS: Political Science and Politics*, addressed the question of economic measures, suggesting that some of the gap between the predicted and actual vote

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m i g h t have been due to the use in the models of change in Gross Domestic

respondents said they voted for Gore, 48% for Bush.)

Other bases for political scientists' appraisals of the campaign have been models, which have been reasonably successful in predicting or explaining the outcomes of previous presidential elections. Most of these models are based on the state of, or change in, economic indicators and on the incumbent president's approval ratings. Since both of these were extraordinarily strong in 2000, the models tended to predict a relatively easy victory for Gore.

Product instead of Real Disposable Income as a key indicator. An additional increment, they speculated, might have been due to the slowing of the economy in the fall—data unavailable when the predictions were calculated.

After testing the accuracy of 48 different models, Bartels and Zaller saw no need “to posit either unusual incompetence on Gore's part or unusual skill on Bush's part.” Thomas Holbrook put at least part of the blame for the models' failure on the fact that the economic news voters reported hear-

ing during the fall campaign was more negative than the objective state of the economy warranted.

In the same symposium, however, James Campbell agreed that the slowing of economic growth may have been a factor in the failure, but specifically discounted the possibility that the strength of the economy was overestimated and continued to assert that “Gore badly misplayed what appeared to be a winning hand.”

Is Campbell correct? Did Gore misplay a winning hand? The first-pass reaction to the vice president’s loss was to blame him for separating himself too much from Bill

“The first-pass reaction to Gore’s loss was to blame him for separating himself too much from Bill Clinton.”

Clinton and his record of economic prosperity, and for failing to make effective use of Clinton as a campaigner. Gerald Pomper, who has edited volumes assessing the past seven presidential elections, offered in *The Election of 2000* a classic statement of what appears to remain the majority position. Gore, he wrote,

did not properly exploit the advantages offered by his administration’s economic record.... In theoretical terms, the vice president turned the election away from an advantageous retrospective evaluation of the past eight years to an uncertain prospective choice based on future expectations.... [H]e, along with Bush, instead made the elec-

tion a contest between two individuals and their personal programs.

At least three other editors of compendia analyzing the election seemed to agree. According to Michael Nelson (*The Election of 2000*),

Gore lost [because] he distanced himself from both Clinton the president and Clinton the person.... Gore went overboard.... [I]nstead of emphasizing the national prosperity that had marked the Clinton-Gore years, [he] ran a populist-style campaign... more appropriate for a candi-

date challenging an opponent in economic hard times....

Larry Sabato (*Overtime!*) criticized “the failure of Gore’s campaign to capitalize fully on the six consecutive years of good economic times. This omission was the most puzzling shortcoming of Gore’s effort and indisputably fatal to his presidential hopes.”

And Stephen Wayne and Clyde Wilcox (*The Election of the Century*) concluded that, “In retrospect, Gore’s decision to distance himself from Clinton was self-serving and politically incorrect.”

But even some of these analysts’ own co-contributors had their doubts. In the Wayne-Wilcox volume, Anne Marie Cammisa wrote,

[I]t is not at all clear that Gore would have won handily had he associated himself more closely with the president. Whether or not Gore should be faulted for not running on economic prosperity, it is clear that his campaign decisions were handicapped by his association with the impeached president.... It is unclear whether he or his campaign could have done anything differently to lay claim to the good economy.... [S]omething other than the economy decided the election this year.

Before the election, Frank Newport in *The Gallup Poll Monthly* reported the results of a late October survey of likely voters, asking whether Gore’s ties with Clinton made them feel more favorably or unfavorably toward him. “Unfavorably” was chosen by a three to one ratio—seven to one among independents. Moreover, 40% said that Clinton’s campaigning for Gore would make them less likely to vote for the vice president, while only 17% would be more likely to vote for him. And several Gallup surveys taken between January 1999 and August 2000 found voters either evenly split or favoring Bush when asked which candidate would better handle the economy.

In an unpublished paper, Stanford researchers Sunshine Hillygus and Simon Jackman assessed the cost to Gore of negative opinions of the president via a question asking respondents their “overall impression” of Clinton. “The more the respondent disliked Clinton,” they wrote,

the less likely he or she was to support Gore, regardless of previous candidate preference.... The concern about a negative ‘Clinton effect’ may well have

been warranted. Even controlling for previous preferences, there was a strong and consistent relationship between Clinton unfavorability and the probability of supporting Gore.... For many voters this relationship was actually large enough that the change from favorable to unfavorable... switched their vote preference from Gore to Bush.

[In a previous article in *Public Perspective*, this writer pointed out that in New York state, Gore's margin of victory was more than double that of Hillary Clinton—who ran as “Hillary,” not as “Clinton,” in her Senate race.]

Some researchers have dissented altogether from the view that Gore ran a bad campaign. Paul Abramson, John Aldrich and David Rohde have co-authored analyses of presidential elections since 1980, primarily utilizing the NES. In *Change and Continuity in the 2000 Elections*, they wrote, “We do not say that Gore could not have won, but simply that the view that his victory should have been easy and sure is off the mark.”

They noted that campaigns without incumbents are usually close, that Gore came from behind twice, that exit poll data justified his concern about the impact in key states of having Clinton campaign for him, and especially that “Gore was at a strategic disadvantage because of [Ralph] Nader.” A shift toward the center might have cost Gore as many votes to Nader or to abstention, they felt, as it might have pulled from Bush. Similarly, Thomas Mann of the Brookings Institution main-

tained in the *Wall Street Journal* that “The evidence was overwhelming that Clinton would have done more harm than good with swing voters in battleground states.”

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Abramson and his colleagues also disputed Pomper's contention, based on CBS News polls, that “if every citizen had voted, both the popular and electoral votes would have led to an overwhelming Gore victory.” Their judgment was, rather, that “differential turnout had a negligible effect on the overall share of the vote.”

And while Ceaser and Busch believed that “Gore did indeed lose it in the campaign and because of the campaign,” they maintained that this was *not* because he separated himself from Clinton, but in large part because of his exaggerations, misstatements and overall performance, especially in the first debate.

Some support for this contention can be found in the Hillygus and Jackman paper. Their study was based on responses to a Knowledge Networks panel survey that interviewed 29,000 respondents, in some cases ten times or more, between August 1 and Election Day.

Employing regression analysis as well as cross-tabulations, they reported vote switches—including those from undecided respondents—toward Gore after the conventions, but toward Bush after the debates. They found that

46% of all those interviewed changed their minds at some point during the campaign!

Another unpublished paper even explored the impact on the campaign of the Elian Gonzalez brouhaha.

Walter Mebane Jr. and Jasjeet Sekhon employed a multinomial model to estimate its effect on the Florida outcome and concluded that it led to

a net swing of roughly 50,000 votes from Gore to Bush.... While the butterfly ballot was perhaps the final blow that destroyed Gore's chance of winning on Election Day in Florida, the turmoil over Elian Gonzalez had already dealt his campaign a crushing blow.

As we all know, the Supreme Court stepped in to resolve the dispute over who won the 2000 presidential contest. It appears highly unlikely, however, that the court or any academic body will be able to reconcile the differences among scholars', pollsters' and political activists' evaluations of the Gore campaign.

Like the viewers of the movie *Rashomon*, in which each character remembers the circumstances of the same crime differently, readers will have to compose their own versions of what determined the outcome of the 2000 presidential campaign, and then decide what lessons to draw for future elections.