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Election 2004 in perspective -- Part I

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Election 2004 in perspective -- Part I

What lessons can be learned from the 2004 presidential election?

The dust of Election 2004 is starting to settle. The Democrats are everywhere seeing red, which is giving them the blues. At this point it is helpful to take a step back from the fray and try to put the election in historical perspective. When it comes to the presidency:



1. Republicans who run as conservatives (not moderates) win. Conservatives have prevailed in four of the last seven elections. Two-term President George W. Bush calls himself a "compassionate conservative." But an earlier two-term president, Ronald Reagan, was arguably the most conservative president in the 20th century, and he won both the 1980 and 1984 elections in landslides.

Back in 1952, Dwight Eisenhower ran as a staunch conservative during his first campaign, winning by a large margin even while vowing to abolish Social Security. Richard Nixon, who early in his first term reached out to the "silent majority" of Americans in Red states, positioned himself as a conservative, and went on to be re-elected in a landslide in 1972.

Moderate Republicans typically don't do as well. Consider the ill-fated campaigns of Gerald R. Ford in 1976, George H. W. Bush in 1992, [1] and Bob Dole in 1996. Indeed, only once in the last half century -- in 1964, when Barry Goldwater lost to Lyndon Johnson -- has a self-consciously conservative Republican been rejected at the polls.

2. Democrats who run as liberals (not centrists) lose. The political landscape is filled with the detritus of left-of-center candidates -- George McGovern, Walter Mondale, Michael Dukakis, John Kerry -- every one of them defeated at the polls.

In response to Ronald Reagan's stunning electoral success, Democrats formed the Democratic Leadership Council to champion more moderate candidates who could talk like -- well, Republicans. DLC Democrats wanted to cut taxes, reform welfare, and shrink significant sectors of the federal government. Not coincidentally, Bill Clinton, who hitched his ideological wagon to the DLC star, was the Democrats' only two-term president after Franklin Roosevelt.

California Senator Dianne Feinstein commented on the election from a Democratic perspective: "When you look at a presidential election where we lost in every age group except one, I think it's time to do some reassessment. I have noticed," she continued, "that all the gravitas [of our party] has slid to the left. All one has to do is look at the map to know that you can't win a presidential election that way. If we keep going on this way, we'll be a minority party."^[2]

3. Religion, morals, and values matter. Hardly any pundits anticipated the shock fact of Election 2004: 22 percent of Americans cited moral values as the primary reason they voted the way they did; not the sluggish economy or the war in Iraq, but moral values; and 80 percent of these voters cast their ballot for Bush. Whoever occupies the office, the president has become a kind of high priest in American life; the people want the person in the Oval Office to reflect their mores.

What went wrong for the Democratic nominee was apparent. On the hustings, Kerry was clearly less comfortable talking about his faith than was Bush. Kerry also had a Senate record that included votes for partial-birth abortions. Because he supported civil unions and was supported by Hollywood liberals, he was damaged goods to evangelical Protestants and conservative Catholics, who came out in droves to support Bush, the candidate with whom they could more closely identify.

As reported by Chris Matthews on MSNBC, about a week prior to the election John Kerry received a phone call from former President Bill Clinton, who advised the Democratic candidate to come out firmly against gay marriage. Kerry declined to take the advice and paid the price.

The backlash against liberals was particularly obvious in the 11 states that offered voters the chance to reaffirm the traditional definition of marriage; in all 11 the conservative position prevailed by large margins (indeed, by a 6 to 1 margin in Mississippi and by a 3 to 1 margin in Arkansas and Kentucky). The landslides even occurred in states where Bush lost the popular vote; in Michigan, voters approved constitutional amendments that upheld the traditional definition of marriage and restricted gambling. For some time now, the great cultural and political divide in this nation has been not between Protestants and Catholics -- as in decades past -- but between those who go to worship services at least once a week, and those who hardly go at all.

4. The "mainstream media" continue to get it wrong. Whether it's the anchor desk at CBS or the reporting desk at the *New York Times*, an unabashed bias is apparent, and Americans in the heartland reject it. It was widely observed, for example, that CNN's Judy Woodruff was visibly distressed Tuesday when Florida went to Bush. Does she know -- does she care -- how silly she looked to folks out in the Red states?

A wise commentator observed that, in Election 2004, it was not the media who were teaching Americans, but Americans who were teaching the media.

5. A final lesson: If many in the media got this election wrong, who got it right? The organization that called it right this time -- as it has in 12 of the last 13 presidential elections -- was the WRC, yes, the same WRC that publishes the *Weekly Reader* that surveys school kids every election year.

As reported two weeks ago, our youngest citizens predicted that Bush would beat Kerry in a landslide. More to the point, they *wanted* Bush to beat Kerry in a landslide.

Of course, these kids are America's future.

A shorter version of this op-ed appeared in the *Detroit News* on Sunday, November 7, 2004.

(Question from The editorial desk of The Detroit News [Detroit, MI])*

[1] George H. W. Bush had a conservative background, gleaned from many of his early political races. When he ran for president in 1988, he also could appeal to conservatives because of his eight years of service as vice president in the Reagan administration. But Bush was abandoned by conservatives over two issues: (1) his decision to raise taxes after the famous "Read my lips -- no new taxes" pledge made at the GOP convention in New Orleans; and his nomination of David Souter to the United States Supreme Court, who proved to be more socially liberal than Main Street as well as the mainstream judiciary.

[2] Dianne Feinstein quoted in Adam Nagourney and Carl Hulse, "For Democrats in Senate, Leader of a Different Stripe: Red State Survivor for Party with the Blues," *New York Times*, November 14, 2004, p. A22.