

“It Was About Ideology, Stupid: The Presidential Vote 2000”

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The 2000 presidential election proved disastrous, not only for Al Gore, forecasters, butterfly ballots, and election-night projections, but also for political scientists' most favored theory of electoral choice. This theory postulates that voters base their decisions on retrospective evaluations of incumbent performance -- good times are supposed to assure the incumbent party's victory on Election Day. Why, then, was the party in control of the White House voted out despite the best of times and record approval ratings for the sitting president? Aside from the Florida fiasco, the mystery of the 2000 election has attracted no end of scholarly sleuthing (e.g., PS 2001), which has narrowed the line-up of electoral explanations to the following suspects:

- *Moral indignation* (keyword "Lewinsky"). Did Al Gore pay for Bill Clinton's sins? Did the negative residue from the Clinton scandals dominate positive feelings about peace and prosperity? Presumably, it was the fear of such contamination that made the Vice President keep his distance from Clinton during the 2000 campaign.
- *Prospective voting*. Did voters act like "bankers" rather than "peasants," to use a familiar metaphor? Was Gore unable to get help from the robust state of the U.S. economy under Clinton because voters were pessimistic about the future of the U.S. economy?
- *The contrasting personalities of the candidates*. Was Gore, in the voters' view, an insufferable "know-it-all," while Bush, though no rocket scientist came across as a likeable "average guy?" Did the public's perception of the candidates' personal qualities give Bush enough of an edge to neutralize the structural parameters of the election?
- *Ideological positioning*. Was Bush superior to Gore at positioning himself on the liberal-conservative spectrum to appeal to the median voter? Did Gore come across as too liberal, while Bush was able to present himself as a moderate? And did the Bush campaign outdo the Gore campaign in raising issues that resonated with the public?

Our analysis shows that *ideological positioning* is the key to the 2000 election puzzle.¹ Bush neutralized Gore's presumptive advantages (strong economy and popular president) with a policy message that trumped his opponent's more liberal message. Bush's advocacy of "less government" fell on more receptive ears than the alternative of a more expansive (and expensive) government. Whatever the slogan of "compassionate conservatism" stood for, it enabled Bush to capture enough of the moderate vote while retaining the loyalty of conservatives. In particular, the strong emphasis on education allowed him to take the electoral wind out of this traditionally Democratic issue. This explanation is one that imputes considerable significance to campaign strategy. In the end, the Bush campaign won the battle to frame the election as a choice between competing ideologies rather than a choice based on the state of the economy or the stewardship of the incumbent administration. Before turning to the evidence for this claim, let us consider the alternatives that came up short.

The "Clinton Factor"

We begin by considering the pall that Bill Clinton was alleged to have cast over the electoral prospects of his vice president. A sitting president invariably leaves some stamp on the election even when he is not on the ballot (Weisberg and Hill 2002). For better or for worse, the record of his administration rubs off on the nominee of his party (although the effect is less than when the incumbent himself seeks reelection). Clinton loomed large in the 2000 election, evoking sharply contrasting responses from the American public. On the one hand, Clinton enjoyed exceptionally high job approval ratings; on the other hand, he fared poorly when judged in personal terms, reflecting the public's misgivings about his moral fiber. Did public distaste for Clinton's moral lapses neutralize admiration of his performance, thus swinging the election to Bush?

¹ The data for the analysis come from the national exit poll conducted by Voter News Service (VNS) on Election Day 2000. This data source comprises more than 13,000 voters from all over of the country selected according to the requirements of probability sampling. Unlike surveys taken after the election, there is no doubt in exit polls that a respondent actually voted, and hardly any chance of faulty recollection of the vote decision.

We combined the VNS questions about Clinton's job-approval and personal conduct into a single index, as shown at the top of Table 1. There were roughly equal numbers of voters at both extremes of the scale -- 37 percent approved of his job performance and liked him as a person, while 41 percent disapproved of his performance and disliked him as a person. A favorable view of Clinton on both counts amounted to a sure vote for Gore just as a consistently unfavorable opinion of Clinton made for a certain Bush vote. The pivotal group consisted of ambivalent voters -- who approved of his presidency, but disliked him as a person. The ambivalent group voted nearly 2-1 for Gore. (Note that only one respondent in a hundred liked Clinton as a person while disapproving of his performance). Thus, the Clinton legacy clearly helped more than hurt Gore, and vice versa for Bush (Norpoth 2001). In hindsight, the Gore strategy of maintaining considerable distance from the president appears to have been a miscalculation, although one cannot be sure about what a more visible Clinton might have done to the vote choices of the ambivalent group.

Table 1. Bush v. Gore 2000: The Key Variables

Opinion of Bill Clinton as President/Person	All	Gore	Bush
Approve/Like	37%	88%	12%
Approve/Dislike	21%	65%	35%
Disapprove/Like	1%	46%	54%
Disapprove/Dislike	41%	8%	92%
Nation's Economy Now			
Excellent	20%	73%	27%
Good	67%	46%	54%
Not so good/poor	13%	35%	65%
Nation's Economy Next Year			
Better	29%	53%	47%
Same	59%	49%	51%
Worse	12%	42%	58%
Candidate Quality that Mattered Most			
Experience	17%	82%	18%
Understands Complex Issues	13%	80%	20%
Cares about People	13%	67%	33%
Good Judgment	14%	49%	51%
Likeable	2%	39%	61%
Strong Leader	15%	35%	65%
Honest/Trustworthy	26%	16%	84%
Ideological Identification			
Liberal	20%	86%	14%
Moderate	50%	54%	46%
Conservative	30%	17%	83%
Political Ideology			
Government should do more to solve problems	45%	76%	24%
Government is doing too many things	55%	26%	74%
Issue that Mattered Most			
World Affairs	14%	43%	57%
Medicare/Prescription Drugs	8%	61%	39%
Health Care	9%	66%	34%
Economy/Jobs	21%	61%	39%
Taxes	16%	17%	83%
Education	17%	54%	46%
Social Security	16%	59%	51%
Party Identification			
Democrat	39%	88%	12%
Independent	25%	49%	51%
Republican	36%	8%	92%
Source: Voter News Service National Exit Poll on Election Day (N= 13,130).			

Overall, it appears undeniable that Clinton was a huge asset for Gore. Without Clinton's strong public standing, Gore might not have run as close a race as he did. Misgivings about Clinton-the-person did little to offset the strong effect of his job approval rating on the vote. That is the way it had been for Clinton himself in the 1996 election, and for his party in the 1998 midterm election. We discuss below whether this seeming advantage holds up with controls for party identification and other determinants of vote choice.

The Economy

As has been widely noted, the effects of the state of the economy on presidential elections are all but inexorable, with good times leading to reelection for incumbent parties, and bad times spelling defeat (for a review of the literature on economic voting, see Norpoth 1996a). Not surprisingly, forecasters of presidential elections bet heavily on economic indicators (Lewis-Beck and Rice 1992, Campbell and Garand 2000). It is hard to recall a presidential election that unfolded under more favorable economic circumstances than in 2000 -- high growth with negligible inflation and unemployment, a booming stock market, and a budget surplus. The standard economic-voting models were all unanimous in their prediction of victory for Gore; the only question was the margin of victory (Kaiser 2000, Clymer 2000).

Table 1 confirms that voters gave the national economy a glowing rating, one that even surpassed their optimism four years earlier, when Clinton easily won reelection. Then, only 4 percent rated the economy as "excellent"; in 2000, 20 percent did so. Gore did capture the lion's share of this group, as Clinton had done four years earlier. But the behavior of those who rated the economy as "good" came as a rude shock to the Vice President. Hard as it may be to accept these figures, Gore lost this group by a margin of 54-46. In contrast, four years earlier Clinton had swept this group by a 2-1 margin. Had Gore matched that showing, he too would have cruised to victory. In this sense, the economy let down both Gore and the forecasters who staked their reputations on the theory of retrospective voting. The theory failed in 2000.

There was a flip side, of course, to economic accounts of the vote. Late in the campaign some economic indicators pointed to the likelihood of a downturn (Bartels and Zaller 2001). Perhaps the good times were coming to an end. Sensing this turnaround, did voters decide that it was time to entrust the ship of state to a new captain? Some students of electoral behavior have proposed a theory that depicts the average voter as a prospective rather than retrospective decision-maker (MacKuen, Stimson, and Erikson 1992). American voters are thought to act like “bankers” making political decisions based on their assessments of future conditions instead of relying, as the proverbial “god of vengeance and reward,” on past performance.

The results in Table 1 offer little or no consolation for proponents of this view. First of all, few voters detected storm clouds on the economic horizon. Most predicted more of the good-to-excellent times and nearly one-third saw even better times ahead. Voters were largely optimistic about the nation’s economic future. What is more, the prospective judgments made only a trivial difference for voting decisions. The vast majority who foresaw more of the same divided evenly between Gore and Bush, while optimists supported Gore only slightly more than did pessimists. While these findings confirm the poor showing of the “banker” model for presidential approval (see Norpoth 1996b), we are still left with the riddle of 2000. If it wasn’t the economy, stupid, was it personal?

Personal Traits

It would be a mistake to reduce the vote for president to a generic contest between the in party and the out-party. The standard-bearers in any given election matter greatly to the voters, and even the same candidate may be received very differently from one election to the next. A good deal of the press coverage of presidential election campaigns dwells on the qualities of the contenders, whether it is their honesty, competence, experience, leadership, judgment, or plain likeability (see Patterson 2000). Thus, the so-called “character” issue is generally prominent in voters’ minds and operates as a perennial short-term force in presidential elections. Whenever the majority party, in terms of voter identification, loses on Election Day one must look for traces of “personality-based” voting.

The conventional wisdom among pundits, strengthened by a good bit of polling data, was that Gore trailed Bush in the likeability stakes. Since Bush's edge in the public's ratings of the candidates' personal qualities went hand-in-hand with his lead in the horse-race poll, it seemed reasonable to infer that the 2000 election was about personality -- not the economy, and not Clinton. While Gore was not without personal strengths, it was perplexing -- to him, no less -- that one of his major strengths seemed to turn into a liability. Without much doubt the Vice President enjoyed a reputation as smart, articulate and knowledgeable, but he also came across to viewers of the televised debates as an insufferable know-it-all. As captured by *Saturday Night Live*, Gore seemed to be the type of person willing to provide the closing statements for both himself and his opponent! Moreover, Gore's connection to Clinton created a minefield of scandals and ethical lapses, causing what may have been mere lapses of memory (was he in New Mexico or Texas with the Director of FEMA?) to be seized upon as systematic exaggerations, thus casting doubts over his honesty and trustworthiness. Did these generally negative impressions of the Vice President's persona provide an opportunity for Governor Bush to overcome his own deficit in knowledge and experience?

As Table 1 indicates, raw personal attraction ("likeability") hardly mattered to voters in 2000; barely two in a hundred cited that attribute. The most frequently cited quality that "mattered most" was honesty (cited by 26%). And among people concerned about honesty, Bush easily won. What also favored the Republican, though less overwhelmingly, was the ability to provide "strong leadership" (cited by 15%). These two qualities, honesty and leadership, were Bush's big personal assets. At the same time, Gore was able to capitalize on several personal attributes: experience (cited by 17%), understanding of complex issues (13%), and caring about people (13%). Among each of these groups, Gore beat Bush handily. Thus, although sharply diverging in personal qualities, the two candidates appeared closely matched in net personal affect. Whether one of them gained a significant edge remains to be settled below with a sharper analytical tool. But given the results thus far, it is doubtful that Bush gained a big enough edge in the personal domain to overcome the disadvantages of running against the incumbent party in the best of times. So where did it happen?

Issues and Ideology

Presidential candidates are also judged based on their positions on policy issues and ideology. In terms of the spatial model of electoral competition, voters choose the candidate closest to their ideological ideal point, making it necessary for candidates to cater to the median voter (Downs 1957). So which of the two candidates held the inside track in the race for the median voter? While the ideological distribution of U.S. voters is concentrated in the moderate category, there is a slight tilt in the conservative direction. Self-proclaimed conservatives outnumbered liberals by three to two in 2000, as Table 1 shows. This is an edge conservatives have enjoyed for at least a quarter century. A right-oriented playing field handicaps a liberal candidate, but it by no means assures victory to a conservative. An extreme conservative, for example, would not be expected to defeat a moderate or even a moderate-liberal. For candidate Bush, the challenge was to advocate traditional conservative positions without giving up the center. His overall theme of “compassionate conservatism” proved appealing to people in the middle, allowing Bush to capture as much as 46% of the moderate vote. Such a strong showing in the big middle, along with overwhelming backing from conservatives, generally puts victory in reach for a Republican.

The mildly conservative tilt of the American electorate was evident in responses to the question of whether government should do more or less to solve problems. The majority of voters in 2000 (55%) indicated that government was doing “too much,” endorsing Bush’s call for less government intervention while leaving Gore, an advocate of government programs as cures for society’s ills, at a disadvantage. The television debates, among other things, strengthened the public’s image of Gore as an inveterate interventionist. Unlike Bush, Gore was quick to cite specific government programs (e.g. the Employment Non-Discrimination Act) while addressing the issues. The problem for Gore was that in 2000, the American electorate was reluctant to embrace such an activist vision of government.

Bush’s strategy was more nuanced. He aimed to convince moderate voters that although a conservative at heart, he was a pragmatist, concerned more with results than doctrine. This impression

was to be cultivated by campaigning on both traditional “conservative” issues as well as other issues not generally considered part of the conservative repertoire (Frankovic and McDermott 2001). Thus, his tax-cut proposal and accompanying rhetoric to let the individual citizen rather than government spend much of the budget surplus stood in stark contrast to Gore's proposal for a smaller tax cut targeted to “solve social problems.” The second signature Bush issue in 2000 was education. In fact, education was promoted more frequently by the Bush campaign than any other issue! The Bush television ad that reached the most voters dealt with education, and ads dealing exclusively with education accounted for nearly one third of the entire Bush ad campaign (Manna, 2002). A similar pattern was apparent in Bush’s “free media” strategy: twelve percent of the Bush campaign’s press releases over the course of the entire campaign made reference to education, making it the most cited issue in the Bush media arsenal. (Indicative of their single-minded focus on education, the Bush campaign issued more press releases dealing with their education proposals than “reactive” releases criticizing Gore.) Not only did the Bush campaign push the education button more repeatedly than the Gore campaign (press release data available from authors), but in this respect they also deviated from other prominent Republican campaigns across the country (Manna, 2002).

At first glance, education would seem to be a “Democratic” issue (Petrocik 1996; Iyengar and Valentino, 2000), associated with asking the government to “do more to solve problems.” Indeed for many devout conservatives, any federal involvement in such an inherently local matter as education is anathema. Yet by stressing private initiatives, by advocating vouchers, and by insisting on more rigorous testing (“accountability”) in the public schools, the Bush campaign managed to steer this issue into distinctly conservative waters (for a similar account, see Manna, 2002). What is more, the concern about education helped give “compassionate conservatism” a positive and specific ring.

Further evidence for Bush’s better ideological fit with public opinion comes from questions about what voters thought of each candidate’s position on the issues. A majority of voters (52%) considered Bush “just right,” as compared with slightly less than half who judged Gore that way (46%). More voters thought that Gore was too liberal (46%) than thought of Bush as too conservative (35%). Voters who

pegged a candidate as “about right” invariably cast their votes for him, and those who saw him as too liberal or too conservative voted for the opponent. Was that just a convenient rationalization, or did it bear out an ideological edge for the Republican candidate in the 2000 election? How closely were ideological considerations tied up with the personal evaluations of the candidates and the Clinton factor? And how much of the ideological effect on the vote survives a control for party identification and incumbent approval?

The Parameters of the 2000 Vote

As the estimates for the vote model in Table 2 show, party identification exerted a powerful effect on the presidential vote in the 2000 election. It is worth noting that in the aggregate, Democrats and Republicans were practically even in strength, with the Democrats leading by a mere three percentage points (Table 1). That near-parity, which has been documented by exit polls for several presidential elections by now, testifies to the partisan realignment sparked by the Reagan elections (Miller and Shanks 1996, Ch. 7; Meffert, Norpoth, Ruhil 2001). Still, minuscule as it was, the edge in long-term partisanship favored Gore in 2000, though much less than it did Democrats in years before the Reagan presidency.

Table 2. The Presidential Vote 2000: Parameters and Probabilities

	Parameter Estimates	Change in Probabilities of a Democratic Vote
Bill Clinton		
Presidential Approval	2.13** (.13)	.41
Personal Evaluation	-.74** (.13)	-.18
Nation's Economy		
Current State	.44** (.10)	.11
Future State	-.04 (.09)	---
Candidate Quality that Mattered Most		
Experience/Understanding	1.17** (.14)	.28
Leadership/Honesty	-.86** (.13)	-.21
Political Ideology		
More Government/Less Government	-1.27** (.11)	-.31
Issue that Mattered Most		
Health/Medicare/Rx Drugs/Social Security	.32 (.13)	---
Taxes	-1.25** (.19)	-.28
Education	.13 (.16)	---
Party Identification		
	1.69** (.07)	.34
Constant		
	-4.43** (.38)	
Correct Prediction		
	91%	
(N)		
	(4,763)	
<p>Source: Voter News Service National Exit Poll on Election Day.</p> <p>Note: Entries are logit estimates, with standard errors in parentheses. The dependent variable is the major-party presidential vote decision (Gore coded 1, Bush coded 0). The independent variables, as listed in Table 1, were coded as follows: Clinton presidential approval (1= approve, 0=disapprove); Clinton personal evaluation (1=unfavorable, 0=favorable); nation's current economy (1=poor/not so good, 2=good, 3=excellent); nation's future economy (1=worse, 2=same, 3=better); candidate qualities and issues (1=if mentioned; 0=if not mentioned); political ideology (1=less government, 0=more government); party identification (1= Republican, 2=Independent, 3=Democrat). Change in predicted probabilities was estimated with all other variables held at their mean level and only for significant predictors; for predictors with more than two categories, the unit changes were averaged.</p> <p>*p<.01 **p<.001</p>		

The results in Table 2 also confirm the strong electoral boost that Gore received from Clinton's job approval. The control for partisanship, or for any other factor included in the vote model, does little to render this asset insignificant. To be sure, the mostly negative evaluation of Clinton's character hurt Gore (Fiorina, Abrams, and Pope 2002), but this effect was much weaker than the salutary effect of Clinton's performance as president. For every vote that Gore lost in the Clinton-as-bad-person domain, he gained at least two votes in the Clinton-as-good-president domain. Of course, it would have been better for Gore had Clinton been a saint, but the Clinton factor, on balance, was for Gore an electoral asset, not a liability (also see Shanks 2002). Whether or not Gore could have done more during the campaign to tilt this balance even more in his favor is impossible to determine here.

The state of the economy also worked to favor Gore. As can be seen in Table 2, the overwhelmingly favorable evaluation of the current state of the economy proved a significant determinant of vote choice whereas beliefs about the future state of the economy did not. This is not a case of more of this and less of that. It is instead a stark contrast. There is no evidence of prospective judgments diminishing the electoral benefits of past economic performance in 2000. The "banker" model provides not even a hint of the solution to the mystery of the 2000 election. Moreover, retrospective evaluations of the economy would register an even stronger electoral effect if a key variable mediating their influence, namely Clinton's job approval, was omitted from the vote equation. The good economy was obviously a major ingredient of his high presidential ratings. Dropping job approval from the vote model nearly doubles the size of the current-economy parameter (while still leaving the prospective parameter insignificant). A vote model lacking Clinton approval, however, does not fit as well, suggesting that Clinton's high approval was not all about the good economy.

So, with the Clinton legacy and the economy, as well as partisanship, working to the advantage of Gore in the 2000 election, how was Bush able to make up much needed electoral ground? Did he do so in the domain of personal qualities? The estimates in Table 2 fail to support that hypothesis. If anything, Gore gained slightly more from the two key qualities that favored him (experience and understanding) than Bush did from his strong traits (leadership and honesty). The best that can be said for Bush in this

domain is that his disadvantage was not as large as in the other domains considered thus far, but Bush certainly didn't defeat Gore in the contest of personal qualities.

That leaves ideology and policy issues. It is here that Bush scored big gains over Gore. It was policy-wise that American voters in the 2000 election felt more comfortable with Bush than with Gore. This was not a question of personality. It was not so much about the messenger as about the message. A desire for less rather than more government moved the 2000 vote significantly in the Republican direction, as indicated by the results in Table 2. This effect comes through in powerful fashion even with controls for party identification, the Clinton legacy, and concern for specific issues. Liberal-conservative identification would have just about the same effect on the vote if used instead of the more/less government attitude. While one of Bush's signature issues, taxes, resonated strongly with the electorate in 2000, none of Gore's issues did. Whether it was Democratic war horses like Social Security or Medicare, or more freshly minted proposals for prescription drugs, the salience of these issues moved few votes, if any, toward Gore. Given the Bush campaign's fixation on education, the results in Table 2 may lead one to conclude that the strategy was flawed. After all, voters concerned about education split their votes about evenly despite the huge effort by the Bush campaign (for similar results with NES data, see Manna, 2002). But, put in context, this was a spectacular accomplishment. In 1996, Clinton beat Dole by a whopping 5-1 margin among voters for whom education was the key issue. And four years before that, Clinton beat Bush senior by a better than 2-1 margin (despite the latter's aspirations to be the "education president"). So, by staying even with Gore on education, the Bush campaign neutralized a big Democratic edge without jeopardizing the conservative base.

Conclusion

In the contest for the presidency 2000, Bush scored his key victory on the ideological battlefield. His advocacy of less government fell on more receptive ears than the more expansive (and expensive) vision articulated by Gore. Whatever "compassionate conservatism" meant exactly, it enabled Bush to make significant inroads among moderates while retaining his grip on the conservative vote. In pursuing

a “mixed-issues” strategy, the challenger was able to outflank the incumbent party’s two biggest weapons -- economic prosperity and a popular president – that all but guaranteed victory to Gore. Contrary to a slogan of a previous campaign, this election was about ideology. And with a little luck in Florida, ideology beat performance.

While the Clinton legacy posed some threat to the vice president’s electoral prospects, the net effect was favorable. Admiration for Clinton’s presidential performance mattered far more to voters than did concern over his personal transgressions. For any vote that the latter may have cost Gore, the former netted him between two and three. Yes, had Clinton been a saint, Gore would be president today. As it was, with a near-record approval rating in an election year, the sitting president gave his understudy an ample head start for his race to the White House.

Even though Gore benefited, on balance, from the Clinton legacy, that factor would have proved more decisive had Clinton himself been on the ballot in 2000. The absence of the sitting president from the ballot typically diminishes the electoral benefit of economic performance (Lewis-Beck and Tien 2001, Norpoth 2002). As Vice President, Gore was not in a position to claim equal credit for the president’s performance. So, was it a mistake to declare: “I’m not asking you to vote for me on the basis of the economy?” Perhaps. But the bigger mistake was to ask for a vote on the basis of political ideology, where his opponent held the better cards.

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