One of the lessons which can be drawn, even thus far into the Bush administration, is how difficult it is for an American government to handle the problems of such a fragmented and dynamic society. Guy Peters, who in Chapter 15 addresses the general issue of governance, points out that neither stronger and more cohesive parties nor the absence of divided government have made the process of governing the United States less problematic. The failure of President Bush to get to grips with America's substantive policy dilemmas, despite strong Republican control of Congress, points to a deeper problem in the US system of governance. Indeed there seems to be a more general problem of governmental capacity in the United States which makes federal-level politics increasingly intractable. In order to get greater traction on the substantial policy problems of the United States, resort could be had to devolution (to the state or local government) or to a more administrative/bureaucratic style of decision-making. Yet neither are likely to be feasible in the context of today's highly competitive democracy. Instead we are likely to see a continuation of the paradoxes and conflicts which are so familiar to students of American politics and which in the end serve to guarantee the continuing vitality of the political system.

Peters is concerned with not only the problem of governance in the United States but also the wider issue of the country's style of democracy. He notes the conflict between the majoritarianism implicit in elections and the consensual assumptions built into much of its institutional structure and suggests that in many respects the United States is moving away from consensual democracy. Certainly there is much in contemporary American political life to support the view that the style of democracy which flourished for much of America's history is under strain, not least from a conservative populism which finds expression both in a new presidential assertiveness and in the frequent eruptions of popular sentiment in policy initiatives and referenda at the state level.

Perhaps these tensions are inevitable in a society as diverse, dynamic and fast-moving as that of the United States. It is even more possible that the institutional arrangements which served the United States so well for so long are now dysfunctional and unable to handle the range of policy problems which confront the country. It is more likely, however, that the institutional structures will survive and adapt to the new demands placed on them in a manner which reflects the creativity and incrementalism of American political culture.

Chapter 2

Electoral Politics

John Sides

When George W. Bush was inaugurated as the 43rd President of the United States on January 20, 2001, almost 40 percent of the country and 70 percent of Democrats believed that Bush had not "won the election legitimately" according to a December Los Angeles Times poll. Protestors at the inauguration threw eggs at his limousine as it processed down Pennsylvania Avenue in Washington DC.

Barely ten months later, an ABC News poll conducted on October 8–9, 2001, recorded the highest job-approval rating ever obtained by a president in the age of survey research: 92 percent of respondents said they approved of the job that George W. Bush was doing as president. In a September Los Angeles Times poll, even 82 percent of Democrats approved of "the way President Bush [was] handling the terrorist attack and its aftermath."

Three years later, in the 2004 election, Bush emerged with the lowest fraction of the vote that any elected incumbent president had received since Woodrow Wilson. If approximately 60,000 votes in the state of Ohio had changed hands from Bush to his opponent, Senator John Kerry of Massachusetts — only about 1 percent of the total vote in that state — Kerry would have been elected the 44th President of the United States.

The events described above illustrate how much and how quickly the political and electoral circumstances in the US changed between the 2000 and 2004 elections. Bush won the 2000 election despite losing the popular vote, but saw his public standing skyrocket after the events of September 11. However, in the three years after that tragedy, traditional partisan politics reasserted itself, producing a tightly contested presidential race in 2004. Fundamentally, American politics remains closely divided, which in 2004 produced not just Bush's narrow victory but also a narrow Republican margin in the House and Senate. Thus, even though there were significant changes between the 2000 and 2004 elections — in the national agenda, in rules pertaining to campaigns, in campaign tactics, the outcome also reflected the "structural" features of American electoral politics — personal political loyalties, the advantages of incumbency — that tend to mitigate dramatic change and instead produce stability.
This chapter first traces the key events of Bush’s first term in office and the 2004 campaign. I discuss how these events shaped the fundamental factors that influence presidential election outcomes, such as war and the economy. I also describe how these events shaped public opinion before the campaign got underway in 2004, and how the public’s priorities worked to each party’s advantage or disadvantage. I discuss as well changes in the “rules of the game,” notably in campaign finance law, and how these changes affected candidate and party strategy. All of these topics constitute parameters within which the campaign operates.

I then discuss in more detail the chronology of the primary and general election campaigns, noting key events and explaining some of the novel strategies the candidates pursued in 2004, which de-emphasized traditional techniques like television advertising in favor of a more old-fashioned effort at voter mobilization. In addition to the presidential race, I discuss the consequences of other, sub-national elections in the 50 states and the implications those have for the overall interpretation of the election. Finally, I conclude by briefly evaluating the 2004 campaign on normative grounds, including such criteria as the level of participation.

**From consensus to polarization**

Despite the inauspicious beginnings of his presidency, Bush initially achieved several notable successes. Republicans had a workable majority in the House and, with Vice-President Dick Cheney’s tie-breaking vote, a slim majority in the Senate. Bush was thus able to make good on his campaign promises as Congress passed a large tax cut and major education legislation. The latter, deemed “No Child Left Behind,” drew the support of even liberal Democrats such as Senator Ted Kennedy of Massachusetts. Nevertheless, Bush’s approval rating in this period was slightly lower than other presidents at the same point in their first terms. In a February 2001 poll by the Pew Center for the People and Press, Bush’s approval rating was 53 percent, which was lower than Clinton’s (56%), Bush Sr’s (63%), Reagan’s (55%), and Carter’s (71%).

That changed with the terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001. Dramatic events, such as war and other threats to national security, typically lead citizens to “rally ‘round the flag” and support the country’s political leaders during the crisis. This “rally effect” is particularly notable when the President commands bipartisan support from other political leaders (Brody and Shapiro, 1989). Such was the case after the attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon. Members of Congress from both parties publicly supported the president. On September 15, both houses voted nearly unanimously (98-0 in the Senate, 420-1 in the House) to authorise the president to use “all necessary and appropriate force” against anyone involved in the attacks. Bush described himself as personally transformed by these attacks and quickly moved to invade Afghanistan and overthrow the Taliban, the radical Islamic regime that harbored Al Qaeda, including Osama bin Laden. On the domestic front, “homeland security” became the foremost priority; a new cabinet-level Department of Homeland Security was created in 2002.

The consensus that characterized the weeks immediately after the terrorist attacks was temporary. This return to politics-as-usual was not necessarily surprising in that “rally effects” typically prove short-lived. It was striking, however, how quickly an event that seemed to unify the country and, in some sense, the world gave way to one of the most polarized periods in recent political history. The specific events that produced this polarization are familiar, but can be summarized in brief. First, even the establishment of the Department of Homeland Security entailed some partisan wrangling over whether employees could be unionized. Second, though military action in Afghanistan was successful in deposing the Taliban, Osama bin Laden eluded capture and escaped, it is believed, to the mountainous region along the Afghan–Pakistani border. Third, the country’s anguish following the terrorist attacks was accompanied by calls, initially resisted by the Bush administration, for an external commission to investigate the attacks and why the government failed to foresee them. Though the bipartisan “9/11 Commission” worked to remain above the fray, its deliberations and hearings inevitably provided grist for each party. Finally, and most importantly, the Bush administration prosecuted a war in Iraq that angered prominent allies and was controversial among Americans. Although American military forces marched to Baghdad, overthrew the regime of Saddam Hussein with considerable alacrity, and captured Hussein himself in December of 2003, a growing Iraqi insurgency has kept car bombings and civilian and military casualties on the front page. Moreover, American forces did not find any “weapons of mass destruction” – the presence of which was a key part of the Bush administration’s case for the war.

The other major event of Bush’s first term was an economic downturn. After several years of robust growth, the economy had showed signs of weakening during the last months of the Clinton administration. September 11 catalyzed a recession. Whereas in 1999 only 19 percent of respondents in a University of Michigan survey said that their financial situation had gotten worse in the past year, by the end of 2002, nearly twice as many (37 percent) of respondents expressed this view. The unemployment rate rose during this recession and, afterwards, began only a weak recovery. However, in the months leading up to the campaign, trends began to favor Bush: between January of 2003 and September of
2004, the percentage of respondents saying their financial situation had improved increased from 37 percent to 49 percent.

The consequences of these events are visible in Figure 2.1, which tracks the job-approval rating of President Bush. Each dot represents an individual poll and the line represents the “smoothed” average of these polls. This figure shows the “rally” that occurred in September 2001 and its gradual ebbing away, with smaller rallies at the beginning of the Iraq war and when Saddam was captured. This overall decline in approval was accompanied by a striking polarization along partisan lines. In the first ten months of 2004, an average of about 90 percent of Republicans approved of Bush, whereas only 15 percent of Democrats did so. This gap of over 70 percentage points is the largest observed for any president beginning with the Eisenhower administration (Jacobson, 2005). Opinions about the Iraq war generated a similarly strong partisan disagreement. At the time of the 2004 election, over 80 percent of Republicans approved of the war, while only 20 percent of Democrats did so. This extent of polarization is greater than during any other major war, including the Vietnam and Persian Gulf Wars (Jacobson, 2005).

This pattern of polarization seems, on its face, to conform to the increasingly fashionable division of the United States into “red” and “blue” America, with “red” connoting Republican or conservative and “blue” connoting Democratic or liberal (Brooks, 2001). The red-blue distinction brings with it not only stereotypes about political preferences but also stereotypes about the consumer choices that allegedly accompany these preferences. Thus, Brooks (2001, 53), assuming the identity of a “blue” American, writes: “We sail; they powerboat. We cross-country ski; they snowmobile. We hike; they drive ATVs [all-terrain vehicles]. We have vineyard tours; they have tractor pulls.” However, these descriptions amount to caricatures that are mostly false. Most American states and most American voters are not dogmatically red or blue, but instead a combination of the two—a shade of purple, as it were. This is to say, American states routinely vote for a presidential candidate of one party while simultaneously electing a senator or governor of the other party. American voters tend to have moderate viewpoints on most political issues, even divisive ones such as abortion (Fiorina, Abrams, and Pope, 2005). Thus, polarization in 2004 is not the result of immutable characteristics of states or of voters’ preferences for cars, beer, or coffee. It is instead a reaction to a particular political moment and to the controversial policies of the Bush administration.

A well-known fact about American presidential elections is that their outcomes depend heavily on such factors as the incumbent’s approval rating, the state of the economy, and whether the country is at war (Zaller, 2001). The conditions described above—a divided country, a weak economy, and a controversial war—did not on their face suggest an easy victory for Bush. However, among those political scientists and economists who use these conditions to develop models that forecast the outcome of the election, their unanimous opinion as of the early fall was that Bush would win, though in several such forecasts the race was quite close (Campbell, 2005). The conditions in the country in terms of these “fundamentals” were not so felicitous as to guarantee a victory for Bush, but neither were they so grim as to guarantee his defeat. These conditions, combined with the strong pattern of polarization noted above, provided all of the makings of a very competitive election.

The public’s agenda
What issues did Americans consider most important as the 2004 campaign got underway? At the top of the agenda, unsurprisingly, were the economy, war, and national security. In a July 2004 Harris Poll, 42 percent of respondents named the economy or jobs as one of the “two most
important issues for the government to address." Twenty-four percent cited the war in Iraq, 11 percent terrorism, and 11 percent national or homeland security. Several domestic issues garnered attention as well, including health care (17 percent) and education (9 percent).

On its face, this agenda tended to favor Republicans. Political parties in the United States accrue reputations over time that amount to "ownership" of particular issues (Petrocik, 1996). These reputations stem from the parties' attention to particular issues and their record of formulating policy to address these issues. Loosely speaking, the Democratic Party is thought to "own" domestic issues such as social security, health care, and education, while the Republican Party is thought to "own" issues such as national security and defense. For example, in an August 2003 Washington Post poll, voters were asked which party they trusted to handle "the war against terrorism at home and abroad." Fifty-four percent said they trusted the Republicans while only 25 percent said they trusted the Democrats (the remainder said both or neither). By contrast, the public's perceptions of which party was better able to handle the economy were more evenly split, with 47 percent trusting the Democrats and 37 percent the Republicans. Thus, the salience of the war in Iraq and national security concerns arguably benefited Republicans and in particular President Bush.

In considering the public's agenda, it is important also to differentiate the public and consider the specific agendas of particular sub-groups. Converse (1964) argues that the public can be conceptualized as an amalgam of individual "issue publics." Each issue public comprises the subset of the population that is attentive to that issue and likely to make choices based on it. In 2004, the "issue public" that garnered the most attention was religious conservatives. Although the visibility of religious conservatives had waned somewhat in the 1990s with the dissolution of its most visible interest group, the Christian Coalition, events during Bush's first term brought religious conservatives to the forefront once again.

Most notable was a series of events surrounding the issue of same-sex marriage. In February of 2004, the Massachusetts Supreme Court ruled that prohibitions on gay marriage were unconstitutional under the Massachusetts Constitution. The Mayor of San Francisco, Gavin Newsom, seized on that decision to begin issuing marriage licenses to gay men and women, in some circumstances performing the ceremony himself. City officials in several other communities, such as New Paltz, NY, and Portland, OR, did likewise. This produced a heated political debate, with President Bush himself endorsing an amendment to the US Constitution that would define marriage only in heterosexual terms. To be sure, despite this debate, few Americans ranked same-sex marriage as a top priority. In the aforementioned Harris Poll from July 2004, only 2 percent listed same-sex marriage as one of the two most important issues. However, this issue certainly animated many conservative Christian leaders and set the stage for a later debate over the role of conservative Christian voters in the election's outcome, to which I return below.

The "rules of the game"

As they formulate campaign strategies, candidates not only must grapple with fundamental conditions in the country, such as the economy, that are largely beyond their immediate control, but also must respond to important changes in the rules that govern the campaign. The 2004 election was the first conducted under a new set of rules that affected fundraising and spending in the campaign.

American campaigns are widely known to be long and expensive. The concern about the potentially corrupting role of money in elections is longstanding. It gave rise to the Federal Election Campaign Act of 1971 (FECA) and amendments to this act in 1974. FECA limited the amount that any individual donor could give to one candidate and all candidates as a whole. It also limited the amount of money that could be spent by the candidates. These contribution limits were upheld by the Supreme Court in 1976 (the Buckley v. Valeo decision), though the spending limits were struck down as an unconstitutional infringement on the free speech of candidates.

However, during the 1980s and 1990s, the Democratic and Republican Parties were able to take advantage of loopholes in FECA and circumvent these contribution limits by raising what was called "soft money." The parties could receive donations in unlimited amounts and spend it during the campaign as long as they did not coordinate their strategy with the candidates or specifically advocate for the election or defeat of a particular candidate using words such as "vote for" (which came to be known as the "magic words"). Critics argued that the parties were in essence participating in the same corrupt enterprise that existed before FECA and that this gave undue influence to corporations, labor unions, and others who could produce larger donations. They also argued that advertisements funded with soft money, while stopping short of the "magic words," were clearly partisan.

Finally, after years of efforts by its proponents, in 2002 the Bipartisan Campaign Reform Act (BCRA) - also known as "McCain–Feingold" for its two Senate sponsors, John McCain (R-AZ) and Russ Feingold (D-WI) - was passed by Congress and signed by President Bush. Its major effect was to ban the solicitation of soft money by the political parties. It also raised the limit on individual donations and instituted restrictions on when interest groups could advertise during the campaign. Its detractors...
challenged the BCRA in court, but ultimately the Supreme Court upheld these reforms in McConnell v. Federal Election Commission (2003).

How did the BCRA affect candidate and party strategy in 2004? Its opponents feared that it would leave the national party organizations without adequate funds for tasks such as voter mobilization. In actuality, the chief effect of BCRA was not to reduce the amount of money in elections, but to encourage the parties to innovate in how they raised money, in particular by capitalizing on the Internet to reach potential donors and allow them to give on-line. This, combined with the enthusiasm and passion surrounding this very competitive election, enabled the parties, as well as the candidates themselves, to raise much more money than they raised in 2000. In the 2004 elections, the Democratic Party raised $494 million (v. $300 million in 2000) and the Republican Party raised $657 million (v. $500 million).

The BCRA also had major consequences for interest groups, though the most important consequence was entirely unintended. Just as the political parties had been able to raise soft money because of loopholes in FECA, interest groups were able to do so because of a loophole in BCRA. As a result, many new groups were formed during Bush’s first term, the most prominent of which strongly opposed his policies, and began to raise large sums of soft money. These groups became known as “527s” (the designation given to them under the tax code) and included groups such as MoveOn, Americans Coming Together (ACT), and the Media Fund. These groups raised money from citizens both rich and poor, but it was their large donations from rich individuals that drew the most attention. Most notorious among these individuals was the financier George Soros, who contributed approximately $27 million to several anti-Bush groups. Bush supporters reacted by setting up groups such as the Swift Boat Veterans for Truth. All combined, these groups spent over $500 million in the 2004 election.

The resources that these groups marshaled made them a significant player in the campaign in several respects. Though they could not spend soft money donations on advertisements that explicitly endorsed or opposed parties or candidates, they could air more strident or controversial messages that the parties or candidates would not. Most infamous were the advertisements aired by the Swift Boat Veterans for Truth, who criticized Kerry’s record of service during the Vietnam War. Finally, these groups were also engaged in other important campaign activities, notably voter mobilization. The Democratic Party actually delegated most of its voter mobilization activities to groups like MoveOn and ACT, who organized volunteers to go out and contact voters.

At this point in time, it remains unclear whether 527 organizations will be allowed to raise soft money in later election cycles. Major proponents of campaign finance reform, such as McCain, want to close this loophole, and President Bush has expressed his willingness to do so. Whatever reforms are enacted in the next several years, the lessons of the BCRA suggest that, short of moving to a system of campaign finance that depends completely on tax revenue rather than private donations, money will continue to flow freely into the hands of candidates, parties, and interest groups. In the conclusion of this chapter, I discuss the normative consequences of money’s role in elections.

A campaign chronology

The primary campaign

As the 2004 campaign got underway, the central question was who the Democratic Party would nominate to oppose Bush, who faced no opponent from within his own party. The Democratic field was wide-open, and nine major candidates came forward to run. Of these the initial front-runner was Governor Howard Dean of Vermont, whose quick rise to prominence surprised many observers. Though as governor Dean was not an ideologue – for example, he signed a bill allowing gay couples to form civil unions but opposed gun control laws – his message appealed to the left wing of the party because he was strongly opposed to the war in Iraq. The other more prominent candidates – Kerry, Senator John Edwards (NC), Senator Joseph Lieberman (CT), and Representative Richard Gephardt (MO) – had all voted for a resolution granting Bush the authority to prosecute the war. Dean’s personal charisma and energy also seemed to attract interest, particularly from young voters.

Dean’s campaign organization was notable in its use of the Internet. First, the Dean campaign was able to raise a large amount of money via the Internet. Using the Internet in this fashion was not new, but Dean’s campaign proved its effectiveness. Dean raised more money than his opponents ($53 million in the end) and a substantial fraction – e.g., half in the third quarter of 2003 – came from Internet contributions, many of which were in small amounts like $25. Second, the Dean campaign used the Internet as a tool for supporters to organize and interact. Whereas campaign events are often organized by the campaign staff, Dean’s campaign encouraged supporters to plan their own meetings, fundraisers, rallies, and the like. One website in particular – meetup.com – became a forum where Dean supporters would coordinate their efforts.
The Dean campaign had the ingredients of a successful campaign for the presidential nomination: media attention, fundraising, and sizable support in pre-election polls. In presidential primaries all of these come together to create expectations about each candidate. The candidate’s performance in the primaries is evaluated in light of those expectations, and expectations for the Dean campaign were high. Meanwhile, his opponents struggled to attain comparable recognition and support. In a January 2004 poll of likely Democratic voters conducted just before the first primary, 26 percent supported Dean. His nearest rival, General Wesley Clark, garnered 14 percent. John Kerry garnered only 8 percent. Dean seemed poised for victory as the first caucus was held in Iowa on January 19, 2004.

When the votes were counted, the outcome was somewhat stunning. Dean finished a distant third, with 18 percent of the vote. The victor was John Kerry (38%), who not two months before had mortgaged his house in order to loan his flagging campaign $6 million. John Edwards finished second, with 32% of the vote. That night, Dean gave a speech to supporters, punctuating his remarks with a yawn that became known as “the scream.” This speech was widely lampooned, adding to his campaign’s difficulties. Explanations for Dean’s unexpectedly poor showing were various, and ultimately there is not yet hard evidence for any of them. In the weeks leading up to the caucus, Dean and Gephardt had engaged in an increasingly negative exchange of advertising that some observers thought had alienated Iowa voters. (Gephardt received only 11 percent of the vote, even though he is from a neighboring state. He dropped out of the race soon thereafter.) It may also have been that Dean’s support base was simply not as well developed in Iowa as in other parts of the country. Finally, voters may have been thinking ahead to November and questioning whether Dean’s background and message would serve him well in the race against Bush. Kerry, with his record of military service, may have seemed more likely to win an election so centered on national security. And, ultimately, perceptions of viability or electability are the driving force in presidential primaries (Bartels, 1988).

Two key aspects of presidential primaries are “front-loading” and “momentum.” Front-loading refers to the tendency of states to schedule their primaries earlier and earlier in the year so that their outcomes are more influential in the process. Because of continued front-loading, in 2004, 18 states held their primary or caucus in January or February. Thus, the outcome was known very early, well in advance of the party conventions in July and August. Momentum refers to the fact that the candidate who does best in initial contests tends to win later contests, as other candidates drop out and as voters jump on the winning candidate’s bandwagon. The Kerry candidacy was no exception. His strong showing in Iowa helped propel him to victory in the next primary, in New Hampshire – a state where he had something of a geographical advantage because of his ties to neighboring Massachusetts. He won every other later primary, with the exception of the South Carolina primary (won by Edwards, who was born in that state). Thus, Kerry’s improbable victory in Iowa was sufficient to propel him to the Democratic nomination for President. In July, Kerry selected as his running mate John Edwards, whose origins in the South complemented Kerry’s in the Northeast and whose strong performance in the primaries after only six years in elected office had burnished his reputation significantly. The stage was now set for the fall campaign.

The general election

Figure 2.2 plots the fortunes of the two candidates from June 1 until November 1, with the party conventions and debates demarcated. It is important to note that the vertical axis ranges only between 42 percent and 52 percent, meaning that what appear substantial trends actually only reflect changes of a few percentage points. This figure reveals several notable things about the general election campaign. First, the race was quite closely contested, as predicted by the “fundamentals” discussed above. Second, as is common in competitive races, the lead changed hands...
during the campaign (see Stimson, 2004). Had the election occurred in late June or July, Kerry apparently would have won.

These trends also illustrate the influence of campaign events. The Democratic Party convention, which occurred in late July, gave Kerry a "bounce" of about 2-3 percentage points. This is the typical effect of conventions, whose hoopla tends to rally partisans to the cause. However, Kerry's bounce proved temporary. Some attributed this short-lived bounce to the convention itself, which was accused of focusing on Kerry's biography while treating George Bush with kid gloves. The decline in Kerry's support during August also coincided with the first advertisements from the aforementioned Swift Boat Veterans for Truth, who criticized Kerry's service in Vietnam and claimed, among other things, that he did not actually deserve the medals he had won. These ads initially aired only a few times in a handful of states, and the Kerry campaign chose not to respond, believing that their impact would prove minimal. This decision may also have depended on financial considerations. After accepting the nomination, the presidential candidates can spend only a fixed amount of money that is given to them by the federal government. Because the Republican campaign occurred a month later (to avoid conflicting with the Summer Olympics), Kerry had to stretch this money over a longer period than did Bush. Kerry may have wanted to conserve his resources rather than counter these attacks on his record. However, the Swift Boat ads generated enough controversy to stay in the news for weeks. Even though the claims of this group were rebutted by military documents, the apparent damage was done. For the Kerry campaign, hoping to capitalize on Kerry's military service during a war that Bush had avoided, this was a low point. After the race was over and with the benefit of hindsight, various commentators would suggest that the Kerry campaign should have responded sooner and more forcefully.

The Republican convention began in late August and its effects were greater, as Figure 2.2 suggests. It gave Bush a substantial lead, one that would narrow but never vanish. Bush's performance in the first debate on September 30 did cost him a few percentage points. Commentators described his performance as "peeved" (Newsweek's Jonathan Alter) and "repetitious" (the Washington Post's Tom Shales). In a Los Angeles Times poll conducted just after the debate, 54 percent thought Kerry had won, 15 percent though Bush had won, and 30 percent though the outcome was "even." Even the First Lady, Laura Bush, chided her husband, "I don't know what happened. You've got to be yourself, and you weren't" (Newsweek, "Face to Face," 110).

The debate gave the Kerry campaign a much-needed shot in the arm, but little changed after that moment. The vice-presidential debate and the two subsequent presidential debates did not produce much change in the polls.

At the campaign's end, Bush had about a 2 percentage point lead. On Election Day, this same margin held: Bush won approximately 51 percent of the major-party vote to Kerry's 49 percent. Though Kerry won about 8 million more votes than did Al Gore, Bush won nearly 12 million more than he had in 2000. Exit polls on Election Day showed that, relative to 2000, Bush made gains among all types of voters - men and women, whites, blacks, Latinos, the young and the old, the rich and the poor. His vote share increased in "red" and "blue" states alike.

Table 2.1 (overleaf) shows the breakdown of the presidential vote by various demographic categories. By and large, these do not reveal any new patterns of behavior. There is a small gender gap, with women more supportive of Kerry than men. This gap, which has opened up because of the growing conservatism of men (Kaufman and Petrocik, 1999), was smaller in 2004 than in 2000. Differences across age, education, and income categories reveal that the young, the college-educated, and the less well-off were more supportive of Kerry than other groups - though as with gender none of these differences are very large. More potent cleavages in the American voting public have to do with ethnicity and religiosity. White voters are more Republican than black, Latino, and Asian voters by a considerable margin. Bush's support among Latinos (45%) was larger in 2004 than in 2000, where he won 37% of the Latino vote. The influence of religiosity depends less on religious preference - though Jewish voters continue to be much more Democratic than Protestants or Catholics - than on religious practice. Those who attend church services at least one a week are much more likely than less frequent attenders to support Bush. Finally, these data also demonstrate the polarization of the parties: 88 percent of Democrats voted for Kerry, and 94 percent voted for Bush. Party identification continues to be a robust influence on the presidential vote (see Bartels, 2000).

**Campaign messages**

What was this election "about"? What agendas did the candidates pursue and what factors appear relevant in explaining the election's outcome? First, it is important to note that, by and large, presidential campaigns do not differ in their agendas (Sigelman and Buell, 2004). Both candidates tend to discuss the same issues. In 2004, Bush and Kerry focused on the war in Iraq, homeland security, the economy, Social Security, and health care. The differences came in how they framed or discussed these issues. Kerry's message was illustrative of what candidates challenging an incumbent frequently do: targeting the performance of the incumbent administration. Kerry focused on the economic downturn and in particular job losses. He
Table 2.1 Demographic attributes and the presidential vote

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<th>% voting for Bush</th>
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<tr>
<td>Weekly or more</td>
<td>65</td>
<td>34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Less than that</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>57</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Party identification</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Republican</td>
<td>94</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Democrat</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>88</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Numbers may not add to 100 because of voters for other candidates or non-response.
Source: 2004 Los Angeles Times Exit Poll.

accused the Bush administration of having misrepresented the war in Iraq as well as the war on terror, especially given that bin Laden remained at large. He also accused the Bush administration of having devoted insufficient attention to homeland security. Kerry trumpeted his own plan to create job growth, reduce health-care costs, protect the country from terrorists, and win the war in Iraq.

Bush quite naturally defended his administration’s record, pointing to recent economic gains. He tended to frame the war in Iraq as part of a broader effort to cultivate democracy, which he posited as crucial to winning the war against terror. Another prominent theme was an attack on Kerry’s capacity for leadership in this war. Though it is typically the challenger rather than the incumbent who runs the more “negative” campaign, in 2004 Bush’s strategy was to criticize Kerry early and often in an attempt to “define” him for voters. The crux of these criticisms was that Kerry was indecisive and vacillating, particularly with regard to the war in Iraq. The Bush campaign referred to Kerry repeatedly as a “flip-flopper.” Kerry’s own statements seemed to play into this characterization. Most famous was a statement regarding his votes on a September 2003 bill to appropriate $87 billion more for the war effort. Kerry initially voted for a version of the bill that included provisions repealing previously enacted tax cuts for the wealthy in an attempt to generate revenue for the war effort. When that version failed to win a majority, he voted against a subsequent version that did not contain those provisions. On the campaign trail, his attempt to describe his decision came out thus: “I actually did vote for the 87 billion dollars before I voted against it.” The Bush campaign was ebullient. Bush strategist Mark McKinnon said later, “The greatest gifts in politics are the gifts the other side gives you” (Newsweek, 2004, 70).

In some sense, these messages worked. Though voters perceived Kerry as more knowledgeable and empathetic than Bush, they saw Bush as a stronger leader. Moreover, they tended to see Kerry as indecisive. In the 2004 National Election Study, 63 percent of respondents said that the phrase “strong leader” described Bush “very well” or “quite well.” A smaller number, 52 percent, had this opinion of Kerry. At the same time, 47 percent of respondents described Kerry as someone who “can’t make up his mind.” Only 27 percent said that of Bush. These perceptions dovetail with voters’ opinions about whom they trusted to handle issues like Iraq and terrorism. In pre-election polls, respondents preferred Bush over Kerry by a 2–1 margin. Kerry’s inability to make headway on these issues may help account for his defeat.

Another explanation commonly offered for Bush’s victory concerned the role of conservative Christian voters and the issue of “moral values.” In
The "ground game"

The discussion above mirrors much post-election commentary in that it focuses on the messages of the candidates that were broadcast in advertising, debates, and elsewhere. This is the so-called "air war" of a campaign -- one that became increasingly important in the 1970s as campaigns became centered more on the candidates and less on the party organizations that used to control the selection of candidates and various campaign tactics and strategies. When party organizations were more influential, television advertising was not yet a major part of campaigns. Thus, campaign strategy was not about persuading voters via carefully crafted messages but instead about mobilizing the party faithful on Election Day. Do these mobilization strategies work? Political science suggests that they do, particularly when voters are contacted face-to-face (Green and Gerber, 2004). In 2004, the evidence also suggests that mobilization mattered: turnout among the voting-eligible population was 60 percent, nearly 5 points higher than in 2000. In the future, the parties will likely continue to emphasize mobilization and to refine their strategies for targeting and contacting voters.

Races in the 50 states

The 2004 election saw comparatively little change in the party’s delegations to the House and Senate. In part, this reflects the historic advantages of House and Senate incumbents. Incumbents have greater name recognition among constituents and typically raise enough money to...
narrowly lost in the 2002 Senate race to incumbent Democrat Tim Johnson. Of these elections did not alter overall the partisan balance among Democrats - including Edwards, as well as others in Louisiana, Florida, Democrats, these new districts eventually went into effect and worked as intended. Three Democratic incumbents were defeated in newly redrawn districts.

In the House, the Democrats picked up two seats, one in Colorado and another in Georgia. The Republican Party picked up six seats, four in Texas, one in Indiana, and one in Kentucky. The four-seat gain in Texas was the result of an unusual and controversial redrawing of district lines in 2003–2004. After the Republican Party gained control of both houses of the legislature in 2002, they decided to redraw the lines to ensure a larger Republican share of the House delegation. The district lines had already been redrawn once after the 2000 Census, as is customary. It was a break with historical precedent to redraw them again. Despite protests by Texas Democrats, these new districts eventually went into effect and worked as intended. Three Democratic incumbents were defeated in newly redrawn districts.

The Republican Party also made gains in the Senate. It won six new seats, while Democrats won two. This altered the party balance in the Senate from 51–49 in favor of the Republicans, to 55–45. Most of the Republican gains came about because of retirements of Southern Democrats - including Edwards, as well as others in Louisiana, Florida, South Carolina, and Georgia. These Southern states have become more reliably Republican over the past 40 years, and thus these gains are perhaps not surprising. More surprising was the defeat of Senate Minority Leader Tom Daschle of South Dakota. He was a particular target in 2004 and faced a quality opponent in former Representative John Thune, who had very narrowly lost in the 2002 Senate race to incumbent Democrat Tim Johnson. Thune beat Daschle by only 4,500 votes out of almost 400,000 cast.

Only eleven governors were up for re-election in 2004, and the outcomes of these elections did not alter overall the partisan balance among governors. Republicans were able to defeat one incumbent Democrat, Governor Joe Kernan of Indiana. Democrats did likewise in New Hampshire. Perhaps the most dramatic race in the entire 2004 election was the Washington gubernatorial contest, featuring Republican Dino Rossi and Democrat Christine Gregoire. In a series of events eerily reminiscent of the 2000 dispute in Florida, Rossi was initially in the lead by less than 200 votes, a margin so close that Washington state law mandated a recount. The ballots were counted again by machine, and Rossi's lead narrowed to only 42 votes. The Secretary of State then allowed a manual recount. Gregoire gained enough votes, particularly in Democratic strongholds such as the area around Seattle, to win the election by only 129 votes out of over 2.6 million cast.

Also on the ballots in the states were a number of ballot initiatives, perhaps none more prominent than 11 initiatives that would ban gay marriage. All of these initiatives were passed, many by wide margins. The closest vote was in Oregon, and even there 57 percent of voters supported the ban while 43 percent opposed it. None of these outcomes was particularly surprising. Americans have grown more tolerant of homosexuality over the past 15 years, but when given an up-or-down vote on gay marriage, roughly a two-thirds majority is in opposition. More palatable are "civil unions," which provide gay couples with the legal rights that married couples have but are not "marriages" under the law. When survey respondents are asked whether they favor marriage, civil unions, or no legal recognition, a majority favors either marriage or civil unions. However, this was not the choice presented to voters in 2004. The passage of these initiatives emboldened opponents of gay marriage, who vowed to press ahead to amend the US Constitution. This issue will likely produce further controversy, though if long-term trends continue, the American public will continue to grow more accepting of homosexuality and of gay marriage as well.

Conclusion

The 2004 election stands in stark contrast to 2000 in that there was no prolonged controversy about the outcome. Kerry, after briefly considering a push for re-examining the Ohio ballots, realized that this would likely leave the outcome unchanged, and conceded the morning after Election Day. Though there were reports of difficulties with voting machines, there was less post-election discussion of issues related to election law and technology, in part because they had no apparent consequences for Bush's victory.

That said, reform of ballot design and voting systems remains a salient issue in American elections. In the last few years, political scientists have
devoted increased attention to these issues and have discovered disparities in how ballots look (Wand et al., 2001; Niemi and Hershon, 2003) and how different voting systems perform (Brady et al., 2001; Alvarez, Sinclair, and Wilson, 2004). These disparities have very real consequences for whether voters can accurately cast a ballot for the candidate they prefer and have that voted counted. For example, scholars have demonstrated that punchcard ballots have a much higher rate of errors than other methods of voting, such as an “optical scan” system, where voters fill in an oval next to their choice.

In the wake of the 2000 election, Congress also acted, passing the Help America Vote Act of 2002 (HAVA). This legislation called for a new program that would provide states funding so they could replace punchcard systems like that used in Florida in 2000. This Act also established a new federal agency, the Elections Assistance Commission (EAC), to oversee this process. The overarching goal was “to establish minimum election administration standards for States,” thereby reducing the considerable inter-state variation in how elections were conducted. A potential further goal for future elections is actually to achieve some national standardization so that voters in any one state or county are not disadvantaged relative to voters in other areas because they must rely on a different voting system.

One important consequence of the 2000 controversy in Florida and HAVA was to increase substantially the number of states that used electronic voting systems, which typically involve computerized screens that voters touch directly to indicate their preferences. These electronic systems mostly replaced older punchcard systems. In 2000, approximately 34 percent of the population used a punchcard system; in 2004, that had declined to 19 percent. By contrast, the percentage using an electronic system increased from 8 percent to 29 percent. Electronic systems, to be sure, are no panaceas. Relative to punchcard systems, they improve only slightly on the number of “residual votes” — votes that are not counted because voters fail to enter a preference or make some other mistake — presumably because the technology of “touch-screens” is not intuitive to every voter (see Cal-Tech/MIT Voting Project, 2001). Thus, there is still much that can be done to improve the quality of voting technology and to ensure that every person’s vote is counted.

A second goal, standardization of voting technology and ballot design across counties and states, will likely prove difficult because election oversight is the traditional responsibility of state and local governments, not the federal government. It thus takes significant effort to achieve standardization when the individual action of 50 state governments and even more numerous local governments is required. The recent resignation of the EAC’s director in April 2005, who cited lack of commitment to reform within the federal government, suggests the challenges that lie ahead.

Despite these ongoing challenges, the 2004 election had positive implications, perhaps the most important of which was the high level of voter participation. The turnout rate, 60 percent of eligible voters, was the highest since 1992, when the candidacy of Ross Perot drew many to the polls. Before that, turnout of the eligible population had not broken 60 percent since 1968 (see McDonald and Popkin, 2001). If the participation of the citizens is a, and perhaps the, fundamental quality of a democracy, then the 2004 election is cause for some cheer. The irony, however, is that achieving such a high rate of turnout is likely predicated on other characteristics of elections that observers typically find less commendable – namely, an extremely competitive campaign featuring a lot of “attack” or “negative” advertising. On its face, the 2004 election seems to support the contention of some scholars that negative advertising — i.e., advertising in which the candidates criticize each other on various grounds — actually increases turnout (see Goldstein and Freedman, 2002). Negative information is likely more memorable to voters and may help clarify differences between the candidates and thus the stakes of the election. Thus, a “good fight” could actually help stimulate voters more than it disgusts them.

On the whole, the 2004 election was in some sense a return to normalcy after the uncertainty and controversy surrounding the 2000 election. The incumbent President won re-election, as typically happens (see Campbell, 2000). And so did most Congressional incumbents. Fundamental factors such as the state of the economy predicted a narrow victory for Bush, which is exactly what resulted. Party identification continued to influence strongly voters’ choices. There were no fundamental shifts in the partisan preferences of important demographic groups. Given the race’s competitiveness, campaign events such as conventions and debates were at least somewhat consequential. All of these suggest that campaigns and elections, though they may appear chaotic in the weeks and months before Election Day, also possess a considerable degree of predictability. The 2004 election, while solidifying the Republican Party’s control of the Presidency and the Congress, continued to illustrate that politics in the United States is quite closely divided.

Though the 2004 elections brought victory for Bush and more seats for Republicans in Congress, subsequent events make it less clear that the upcoming 2006 elections will be similarly favorable. The war in Iraq has become increasingly unpopular, the price of gasoline has increased, and the tragedy of Hurricane Katrina has cast doubt on the federal government’s ability to protect citizens in the event of an emergency. Bush’s approval ratings have slipped to approximately 40 percent — about 10 points lower
than when he was re-elected — although there continues to be substantial partisan polarization among the public in its views of Bush’s handling of Katrina and his job generally. Moreover, the need to respond to Katrina, as well as the budgetary expense this response will entail, has reduced the ability of the Bush administration to pursue its other policy goals, such as reform of Social Security and the tax system. But this bad news may not necessarily bode ill for Republicans in 2006: because so many House and Senate seats are relatively safe, it is unlikely that Democrats will make big gains. A recent estimate located less than eight House races and five Senate races that could be considered “toss-ups” (Cook Political Report, 2005a, 2005b).

At this early stage, there are no safe predictions about the 2008 election. Interestingly, the 2008 election will be the first election since 1952 when there will be no incumbent president or heir-apparent (such as a vice-president) running in either party. Thus there is the potential for future shifts in party control depending on circumstances in the country and the candidates who step forward.

Note

* Some scholars, however, have contended that the exit poll data do not contain a representative sample of Latino voters and overestimate the Bush vote (Leal et al., 2005).

Chapter 3

**Parties in an Era of Renewed Partisanship**

Bruce Cain and Darshan J. Goux

The conventional wisdom about American political parties is that they are comparatively weak, not only in contrast to European political parties, but also as compared to earlier periods in American history. Party discipline in the US Congress and state legislatures has traditionally been less than in European parliaments while incumbency factors and the personal vote have been stronger. Moreover, party identification has not typically predicted the vote as closely as in Europe, and political campaigns have centered to a greater degree on individual candidates, not on party platforms (Ranney, 1954). America, home to Downsian theory, had the best examples of Downsian parties: “teams” devoted primarily to winning by tracking the middle of the ideological spectrum as closely as possible. The result was often “echoes, not choices,” candidates so indistinguishable as to nearly erase the rationality of voting.

But that conventional wisdom may be changing. Party-line voting and ideological division in the Congress and state legislatures has increased (Jewell and Morehouse, 2001; Folsby, 2004). Voter partisanship has also been on the rise, although to a lesser degree and somewhat later than in Congress and the state legislatures (Miller and Shanks, 1996; Jacobson, 2001). Where the reform focus in the 1970s and early 1980s was on the incumbency advantage, it is now on the over-heated and bitter resurgence of partisanship. Party bickering inside the beltway presently threatens longstanding traditions of legislative cooperation such as unanimous consent rules and respect for the right to filibuster on matters of deep conviction. The recent debate over the so-called nuclear or constitutional option in the US Senate is symbolic of a deeper breakdown in trust and cooperation between the two parties and the desire of the Republican majority to lessen the Democratic minority’s influence. In the House of Representatives, always a less consensual body, Democrats claim that the Republicans have taken traditional majority prerogatives to the extreme, routinely moving forward with legislation at all stages without consulting the opposition members.