

Election 2004 and Limited Government



What do the election results tell us about American voters and the issues of liberty and limited government?

Incumbents did OK. For the fourth election in a row, incumbents in the House of Representatives won more than 98 percent of their races. And not only are they winning consistently, but they're doing so by wider margins; John Samples and Patrick Basham report that incumbency now adds about 11 percent to the vote share of the average officeholder. The past

three elections constituted the least competitive elections (with one exception) since 1946. Incumbents bask in taxpayer-funded offices, websites, mailings, television studios, and press secretaries, while campaign finance regulations ensure that few challengers will have adequate money.

Why didn't Bush win by more? Election analysis usually begins with the question of why President Bush won, and most of the analysis is partisan, red team/blue team stuff. But perhaps the more interesting question is why his victory was so narrow. Yale economist Ray C. Fair, who has been much celebrated in the media for the accuracy of his economic model in predicting presidential election results, predicted that Bush would win 57.5 percent of the two-party vote. Instead, he won only 51.3 percent of the two-party vote (50.8 percent of the total vote for president). Why did he run six points behind what the economic model predicted?

The best explanation would seem to be the Iraq war. By the time of the election, 52 percent of the voters thought the war was going badly, and that may have cost Bush a few points.

Did gay marriage boost Bush? Some analysts jumped to the conclusion that the 11 state initiatives to ban gay marriage helped Bush win by drawing more Christian conservatives to the polls. It's true that states with such initiatives voted for Bush at higher rates than other states, but that's mostly because the bans were proposed in conservative states. In fact, Bush's share of the vote rose just slightly less in the marriage-ban states than in the other states. Note also that 60 percent of respondents in the exit poll said that they supported either gay marriage or civil unions. And the youngest voters—the future electorate—supported marriage much more strongly than older voters.

Was it a “moral values” election? A broader claim grew out of the exit polls showing that more voters chose “moral values” than anything else as their most important issue. But that claim also fails careful analysis. Yes, 22 percent of exit-poll respondents chose “moral

values” as their top concern, compared with “economy/jobs” at 20 percent, terrorism at 19 percent, Iraq at 15 percent, health care at 8 percent, and taxes at 5 percent. But “moral values” was in first place because of the poll design. If Iraq and terrorism were combined, they would have had 34 percent. A single item for “economy, jobs, and taxes” would have had 25 percent. In addition, of course, it's not clear what “moral values” means. The *Los Angeles Times* exit poll, which asks the question a different way, found that 40 percent of voters surveyed selected “moral/ethical values” as one of their two most important issues in 2004—the same percentage as in 1996, when they reelected Bill Clinton.

It's terrorism, stupid. The most important number in the exit polls was this: 60 percent of respondents said they trusted Bush to handle terrorism, while only 40 percent trusted Kerry. You can't win a post-9/11 election if only 40 percent of voters trust you to protect them against terrorists; people may not be happy with the war in Iraq, but they thought terrorism was the bigger issue.

And freedom. In three national elections now, the old claim that Social Security is the “third rail of American politics” has been disproved. George W. Bush ran in 2000 on the need for private accounts, Vice President Gore sharply attacked him for his position, and Bush won a narrow victory. In 2002 House Minority Leader Dick Gephardt proclaimed, “This election is a referendum on Social Security”—meaning that Democrats would use the “privatization” issue to defeat congressional Republicans. Instead, Social Security reform played a role in the election of several new senators. In 2004 President Bush consistently talked about Social Security reform in his campaign for reelection, and Senators Jim DeMint, Tom Coburn, Mel

Martinez, and John Thune supported individual accounts, were attacked by their opponents, and won. And that's no surprise, as numerous public opinion polls have shown support for private retirement accounts at anywhere from 56 to 70 percent.

Bush said during the campaign, “My opponent is against personal retirement accounts, against giving patients more control over their medical decisions through health savings accounts, against providing parents more choices over education for their children, against tax relief for all Americans. He seems to be against every idea that gives Americans more authority and more choices and more control over their own lives.” The voters chose Bush's approach to those issues, and that's an excellent agenda for the second term.

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—David Boaz