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Moral Visions and the New American Politics

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The presidential election of 2000 was one of the most remarkable in American history for a variety of reasons. The extraordinary closeness of the race and the protracted legal battle over its ultimate outcome were both unprecedented and unlikely to be repeated. Beyond the questions of how the Florida morass should have been resolved and whether the election was "stolen" from its rightful victor, however, are more fundamental ones about the changing nature of partisan politics in America. Putting legal arguments aside, the political reality is that George Bush and Al Gore finished the 2000 campaign essentially in a dead heat, despite the tremendous advantages that Gore possessed from the outset of the campaign. He was the sitting vice president in an administration that had presided over a decade of almost incredible economic prosperity, in which unemployment, inflation, and interest rates simultaneously flirted with historic lows and the stock market generated significant wealth for a broad segment of the American population. He was heir apparent to an incumbent who, despite his personal foibles, enjoyed a steady job approval rating in excess of 60 percent. His opposition from Bill Bradley in the Democratic primary had evaporated quickly, and had been much less substantial and bruising than what his opponent had faced from John McCain. Finally, Gore's political experience and knowledge of public policy, both foreign and domestic, were indisputably greater than Bush's. Thus, it is no wonder that the electoral forecasting models honed over many years by political scientists almost universally predicted a handy Gore victory, with most positing that he would win between 55 and 60 percent of the national popular vote.[1]

And yet, of course, these models were wrong. Their central and most common failing was to exaggerate the importance of economic evaluations in shaping presidential vote choice. In this regard, political scientists were no different from much of the popular press, largely accepting James Carville's 1992 mantra that "it's the economy, stupid!" Indeed, there was good reason to hold to the view that it would be very difficult to unseat an incumbent party in such flush times. At least since the New Deal era, economic issues had

consistently been at the center of presidential campaigns, and a citizen's perceptions of how the incumbent party had handled the nation's economy were reliable predictors of his vote on election day.[2] Based on these assumptions, Gore was clearly in good shape. According to the 2000 American National Election Study,[3] about 80 percent of Americans thought that the Clinton/Gore administration had done a good job in handling the nation's economy (and most of the rest were committed Republicans whose votes Gore could not hope to win in any case). Strikingly, however, more than 40 percent of these same people voted for George Bush in the presidential election. This sort of widespread defection from an incumbent party receiving such high marks for economic performance was unprecedented in modern American politics. Clearly, there were some idiosyncratic and election-specific factors involved in producing this surprising pattern—Gore ran what was by most accounts a relatively poor campaign, Bush significantly exceeded expectations in the debates, etc. More fundamental, however, was a shift in the basis of issue contestation between the two parties. The bread-and-butter economic issues that had shaped American politics since at least since the New Deal era did not dominate the electoral landscape in 2000. Instead, voter loyalties were shaped in critical ways by an issue that for many of them trumped economic interest: competing and starkly different moral visions of the good society.

To grasp the depth of the shift that has occurred in recent American politics, it is important to understand the traditional alignment of the American political parties. From the 1930s into the 1990s, the primary dividing line between Republicans and Democrats was an economic one. Democrats, beginning with Franklin Roosevelt, championed an expansive array of social programs, a broad net that would cover areas ranging from unemployment to education to health care. Republicans, by contrast, were typically opposed to these New Deal and Great Society programs, or at least in favor of more modest, less expensive versions. Fundamentally, one's self-classification as a Democrat or a Republican depended on whether one supported a larger, more comprehensive welfare state with its accompanying higher taxes or a smaller, more limited one with attendant lower taxes.

As a result, party allegiance quite naturally fell at least roughly along class lines. Republicans represented the affluent, Democrats represented the poor and working class, and both parties battled for those in the middle, whose votes determined the outcomes of elections. Higher levels of income and education, the clearest demographic indicators of social class in America, were strongly associated with Republican allegiance from the 1930s all the way through the 1980s. Moral and religious issues remained clearly secondary to the partisan alignment, and peripheral to the meaning of "liberal" and "conservative" in America.

For proof of this claim, one need look no further than two major-party candidates for president during that era. When Barry Goldwater became the Republican nominee in 1964, he was generally regarded as the paradigmatic staunch conservative, perhaps even radically or frighteningly so. Goldwater, who served for many years as a senator from Arizona after his unsuccessful presidential bid, was not especially religious and was a supporter of legalized abortion and expanded homosexual rights.[4] Conversely, Jimmy Carter, the Democratic candidate in 1976 and 1980, was a devout evangelical Christian, a Southern Baptist who spoke in biblical terms of having committed adultery "in his heart" by having looked with lust on a woman other than his wife. As late as 1976, in Carter's race against Gerald Ford, it was not entirely clear which major party candidate was more pro-life or pro-choice on the abortion question.[5] Needless to say, it is almost unimaginable today that such candidates would be their respective parties' standard-bearers. The essence of what it means to be a Democrat or a Republican, a liberal or a conservative, has changed significantly over the past two decades, not moving away altogether from the economic issue dimension but adding to it in a very prominent place a dimension of competing moral visions. It is this shift in the issues that divide the parties that made possible George Bush's victory in 2000 over an opponent bearing the mantle of peace and prosperity.

A decline in the predominance of economic issues as bases for political contestation is consistent with the theory of "post-materialism" advanced for some time by Ronald Inglehart and

colleagues.[6] According to this view, increasingly broad-based affluence in advanced industrial societies allows people to move beyond a politics that focuses on basic material needs and economic security, as these are largely taken for granted in nations far removed from any real economic privation (especially by younger generations). In their place, citizens are able to focus on issues that bear less directly on their own tangible well-being and deal more with their competing normative visions of the good life and the rightly ordered society. From this shift toward post-material politics, according to Inglehart, stemmed the environmentalist, feminist, and civil liberties movements of the 1960s and 1970s, just to name a few. While this insight explains much about politics in the Western world over the past 40 years, it has the potential to be a bit misleading. Inglehart's early vision of the post-material revolution pitted a young, post-material left, committed to the environment, civil liberties, and sexual liberation, against an aging materialist right, committed to maximizing wealth and social stability. The past two decades have witnessed, however, a post-material transformation on the right as strong as that on the left. Both liberals *and* conservatives, in America and Europe alike,[7] are now defined as much by their moral/cultural stances as by their economic ones—witness the transition of the Republicans from a "country club party" to one strongly influenced by conservative evangelical Christians. In light of Inglehart's theory and subsequent modifications, it is not surprising that American presidential politics has seen a move away from the dominance of economic issues, culminating with the election of 2000.

Thus, while social class has declined as a predictor of Americans' partisan allegiance, religiosity has increased dramatically. In determining whether a given individual in 2000 voted for George Bush or Al Gore, it is more instructive to know about his religious commitments than about his economic status. The increasing importance of religion relative to socioeconomic factors is demonstrated in Table 1. Here, the impacts of income, education, and religiosity on presidential vote choice are traced over a 44-year period from 1956 to 2000 (corresponding with the availability of these data in the American National Election Studies). In each case,

entries in the table represent the difference in Republican vote share between individuals in the highest category of the variable in question and those in the lowest category (adjusted so that in every case the comparison groups represent at least 10 percent of the sample, to prevent misleading results stemming from extreme outliers).[8] Thus, the wealthy are compared with the poor, college graduates with high school dropouts, and those who attend church regularly with those who never attend religious services. The results here are unmistakable—education has vanished as a significant predictor of candidate choice, income remains relevant but is of declining importance,[9] and religiosity has surged into the clear lead among these factors. Moreover, the numbers suggest that the critical importance of religiosity in shaping presidential vote choice is not an anomaly of the 2000 campaign. It began to emerge as a discernible factor in the 1988 campaign, then became the most important of these determinants in the 1992 election cycle (coincident with Pat Buchanan's declaration of a "culture war" at the Republican National Convention). Clearly, religious devotion for some years now has gained in explanatory power at the expense of more conventional socioeconomic predictors of candidate choice. The 2000 campaign merely marked the first time that the shift actually changed the outcome of a presidential election.

Table 1
Impact of Selected Variables on Republican Vote Choice (Whites)

	Income	Education	Church Att.
1956:	+35%	+34%	+05%
1964:	+26%	+25%	+05%
1976:	+42%	+24%	+03%
1988:	+23%	+18%	+11%
1992:	+14%	+10%	+33%
1996:	+23%	+12%	+36%
2000:	+13%	-03%	+37%

To provide further insight into the centrality of moral and religious factors in America's current political divisions, it is instructive to compare the magnitude of the religiosity gap with other social cleavages that have been posited as politically salient. Table 2 presents the share of white votes won by George Bush in 2000 broken down by region of the country, income, union membership, gender, education, and church attendance. Not surprisingly, there are discernible differences in candidate choice along all of these dimensions (with the exception of education—presidential preference in 2000 was fairly constant across the education spectrum). More striking, however, is the fact that religiosity's effect is more than *twice* as large as that stemming from any of the other variables. While region, income, and union membership shed significant light on individuals' political preferences, they are dwarfed in importance by the religion variable. The much-ballyhooed gender gap, despite all of the ink spilled analyzing its significance, turns out to be a rather modest 9 percent—not inconsequential, but paling by comparison with the chasm that is the religion gap.[10] Thus, there should be no doubt as to the central role that moral and religious factors must play in any explanation of the 2000 presidential election.

Table 2
2000 Bush Vote by Selected Social Characteristics (Whites)

Region of Residence		
South	66%	
Non-South	49%	Region Gap = 17%
Annual Household Income		
>$100,000	59%	
<$25,000	45%	Income Gap = 14%
Union Membership		
Non-member	55%	
Member	42%	Labor Gap = 13%

Gender		
Male	58%	
Female	49%	Gender Gap = 9%
Education		
High School or Less	49%	
Post-Graduate	46%	Education Gap = 3%
Church Attendance		
Weekly +	77%	
Never	42%	Religion Gap = 35%

Of course, this is not the first time that religion has played a key role in American political life. Religious people and organizations were very active in the abolition, temperance, and civil rights movements, and their efforts transformed politics in very important ways. It is not even the first time that religious issues have figured prominently in a presidential election, as candidates Al Smith and John Kennedy could certainly attest. The new development that distinguishes the current religiously based political alignment from previous ones is the nature of the cleavage. In the past, religious divisions in American politics tended to run along a denominational divide, often pitting Catholics and Protestants on opposite sides of the partisan battle. In 2000, however, the forces uniting religiously observant white Christians of different denominational backgrounds were much stronger than those dividing them.[11] The relevant question, generally speaking, for candidate choice in 2000 was not *where* one went to church, but *whether* one went to church. The figures in Table 3 reflect this new religious divide. For the first time, devout adherents of all of America's major white religious traditions[12] lined up solidly behind the same candidate (in this case George Bush), with each group giving him more than 70 percent support. Conversely, Gore's solid support coalition was composed of secular whites and ethnic minorities (blacks, Hispanics, and Jews). Those in the middle, who did not give overwhelming support to either candidate, were the nominal members of the various white Christian religious traditions—those who profess affiliation with a specific religious group, but who

are not particularly orthodox or devout. They are the key political battleground for whose allegiance the two parties must struggle, people who are, generally speaking, not wedded to either of the starkly different moral visions that have come to characterize the poles of modern American politics.

Table 3
2000 Bush Vote by Religious Group[15]

Mormons	88%
White Observant Evangelical Protestants	86%
White Observant Main-Line Protestants	75%
White Observant Roman Catholics	70%
White Nominal Main-Line Protestants	48%
White Nominal Evangelical Protestants	46%
White Nominal Roman Catholics	35%
Secular Whites	30%
Hispanic Catholics and Protestants	28%
Jews	23%
Black Protestants	4%

So what exactly, one might reasonably ask, are these competing visions? Put differently, what are the weapons with which the political combatants join battle over the terrain described above? Church attendance and religiosity, heretofore analyzed as the main variables of significance, are really just proxies for much deeper and more comprehensive divisions stemming from fundamentally divergent world views. One of the moral visions, embraced in greater or lesser degree by a large segment of the American electorate, might be termed "moral libertarianism." Its adherents have applauded the weakening of traditional norms in American society, particularly on issues of sexuality and the family. They would welcome a decreased role for religion in American public life, regarding religious institutions often as knee-jerk defenders of an outmoded, restrictive, and increasingly irrelevant system of moral strictures. The buzz words for this group are "tolerance" and "choice," invoked to combat legal barriers and social pressures against issues ranging from abortion to

gay rights to unwed motherhood to the use of narcotics. On the other side, these moral libertarians confront a similarly large group devoted to "moral traditionalism." These individuals see much of the cultural change of the past 40 years as fundamentally destructive, and attribute many contemporary social ills such as crime, illegitimacy, and drug addiction to the erosion of consensus on basic moral norms in America. For them, America's Judeo-Christian religious heritage is fundamental to the nation's identity and should be embraced rather than shunned in institutions and public life. Their mantra is "family values," generally taken to mean the defense of the traditional familial unit against the evils of abortion, divorce, homosexuality, and promiscuity so blithely embraced, as they see it, by the moral libertarians.

The historical roots of these competing moral visions, at least from a partisan political standpoint, stretch back 30 years. In a 10-year period in America in the 1960s and 1970s, school prayer was outlawed, abortion was made available on demand, the contemporary feminist movement rose to social prominence, and the gay rights movement was born. These events delighted moral libertarians, dismayed moral traditionalists, and galvanized both. Indeed, the beginnings of evangelical Christian political activism date from just after this period, with the formation of Jerry Falwell's "Moral Majority." Yet, not surprisingly, political developments at the elite level take some time to trickle down to the masses in the electorate. Dimensions of political contestation and patterns of partisan allegiance rarely change overnight.[13] Thus, not until the 1980s did these contending moral visions begin reliably to separate adherents of the two major parties (as reflected in Table 1). In that decade and into the 1990s, school prayer, abortion, and gay rights emerged as clearly partisan political issues, and the "right" positions on these questions increasingly became part of the parties' recognized orthodoxies.

Even these hot-button issues, however, are merely manifestations of the previously discussed world views that differ at a more fundamental level. A short battery of questions present in the 2000 American National Election Study sheds some light on the contending groups' widely divergent views of morality and society. In each case, respondents were given a statement with which they could

agree or disagree. Table 4 breaks down these responses by presenting the percentage of those who "strongly agree" and "strongly disagree" with each statement who voted for George Bush in 2000.[14] The differences are stark. Those who embrace the "newer lifestyles" are 35 percent less likely to vote for Bush than those who reject them. Those who emphasize "traditional family ties" are fully 45 percent more likely to support Bush than are those who doubt these ties as a solution to America's social problems. Finally, in two different but related formulations of the question, ethical relativists are over 40 percent less likely to support Bush than are ethical absolutists. Clearly, these competing moral visions are real, measurable, and of tremendous political consequence.

Table 4
2000 Bush Vote by Response to Selected Survey Items

"The newer lifestyles are contributing to the breakdown of our society."

Strongly Agree:	64% Bush Vote
Strongly Disagree:	31% Bush Vote

"The world is always changing and we should adjust our view of moral behavior to those changes."

Strongly Agree:	34% Bush Vote
Strongly Disagree:	75% Bush Vote

"This country would have many fewer problems if there were more emphasis on traditional family ties."

Strongly Agree:	65% Bush Vote
Strongly Disagree:	20% Bush Vote

"We should be more tolerant of people who choose to live according to their own moral standards, even if they are very different from our own."

Strongly Agree:	38% Bush Vote
Strongly Disagree:	79% Bush Vote

Thus, it appears clear that a religious-secular cleavage, rooted in starkly different moral visions of the good society, has come to play over the past several elections a very prominent role in American politics, upsetting the applecart of economically based electoral forecasting in 2000. It is important, however, to mention some caveats to the morally based partisan dichotomy presented here, as there are at least two major groups that do not fit neatly into the scheme outlined above.

The most glaring exception to the new partisan alignment based on religion and morality is the African American community (and, to a lesser and perhaps more transitory extent, the Latino community). Even though African Americans are overwhelmingly Christian, more religiously observant on average than whites, and generally more conservative on issues like abortion, school prayer, and homosexuality, they remain strongly committed to the Democratic party. A paltry 4 percent of blacks in the 2000 election supported George Bush, despite his efforts at an ethnically inclusive campaign. More significantly, African Americans are the only major group in the population for whom increased religiosity is associated with more *Democratic* vote choice. Clearly, the religious dimension of politics works very differently in the black community than it does in the rest of the population. The moral issues that have gained the Republicans so many adherents among white Christians have gotten them virtually no traction among African Americans, leaving blacks standing largely apart from the morally based realignment that is reshaping white Americans' political allegiances.

A second group that has a difficult time finding its place in this new electoral landscape is what one might term the "Christian left." These are people within all of the major Christian traditions who emphasize a social justice theology and who would reject as a false dichotomy the distinction between moral and economic issues. For them, the distribution of wealth in society and the plight of the poor *are* moral issues. Many of them may be sympathetic to the Republican stance on abortion, but much more drawn to the Democratic party's positions on social welfare issues. In their eyes, they face an increasingly unpalatable political choice between one party that tends to marginalize if not outright denigrate religion in public life, and

another party that emphasizes a skewed view of Christianity elevating personal morality at the expense of a social conscience. Although these individuals are relatively few in the electorate, they tend to be over-represented among Christian intellectuals and clergy in many denominations, and thus bear watching as the ongoing realignment unfolds.

As the primary purpose of this essay is descriptive and analytical rather than prescriptive and normative, it largely has avoided the question of whether the changing basis of political contestation revealed in the 2000 election is "desirable." There are many arguments that could be offered to support either side on this score, from a variety of different perspectives. The question should not be answered from a partisan perspective, because the new religiously based cleavage does not provide a strong advantage for either major party. Although it clearly worked to the benefit of Republicans in 2000 by partially obscuring the importance of economic considerations, it could just as easily have worked to the advantage of Democrats had the circumstances been reversed. It is important to remember that the moral libertarians are just as numerous as the moral traditionalists, and just as committed to their vision of the good society. If anything, the basic political dynamic produced by the new religious/moral cleavage is one of electoral closeness, which could work to the advantage of either party depending on the circumstances. The more fundamental and troubling consequence of this new politics of moral visions is a decreased opportunity for political accommodation and compromise. When parties are arguing primarily over whether the top marginal tax rate should be 30 percent or 40 percent, they can easily compromise at 35 percent and get a result that everyone can live with. When they are arguing, however, over whether the definition of marriage should be expanded to include same-sex couples, it is much harder to "split the difference." Moral convictions, by their very nature, are difficult to compromise. Indeed, most moral and ethical systems teach specifically that they *should not* be compromised. Thus, while the new alignment in American politics does not promise a path to dominance for either major party, it does seem likely to yield a more contentious and divisive politics in the years to come.

Endnotes

1 For a summary of many of the most prominent of these models and their components, see James E. Campbell and James C. Garand, eds. *Before the Vote: Forecasting American National Elections* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 2000).

2 See Donald R. Kinder and D. Roderick Kiewiet, "Economic Discontent and Political Behavior: The Role of Personal Grievances and Collective Economic Judgments in Congressional Voting," *American Journal of Political Science* 23 (1979): 495-527 and Kinder and Kiewiet, "Sociotropic Politics: The American Case," *British Journal of Political Science* 11 (1981): 129-161 for a discussion on the importance of economic evaluations in shaping individuals' voting decisions.

3 This essay draws extensively on data from the American National Election Studies. See Virginia Sapiro and Steven J. Rosenstone, *American National Election Studies Cumulative Data File, 1948-2000* (Ann Arbor, MI: Inter-university Consortium for Political and Social Research, 2002) for details on the scope, administration, and content of these studies.

4 For more on Goldwater's views, priorities, and philosophy, see Barry M. Goldwater with Jack Casserly, *Goldwater* (New York, NY: Doubleday, 1988).

5 Timothy A. Byrnes, *Catholic Bishops in American Politics* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1991) provides a good discussion on the abortion issue in the 1976 campaign.

6 For elaboration of the post-materialism thesis, see Ronald Inglehart, "The Silent Revolution in Europe: Intergenerational Change in Post-Industrial Societies," *American Political Science Review* 65 (1971): 991-1017; Ronald Inglehart, *Culture Shift in Advanced Industrial Society* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1990); Ronald Inglehart and Scott C. Flanagan, "Value Change in Industrial Societies," *American Political Science Review* 81 (1987): 1289-1319; and Ronald Inglehart and Paul R. Abramson, "Economic Security and Value Change," *American Political Science Review* 88 (1994): 336-354.

7 For a discussion on the place of post-material issues on the European right, see Herbert Kitschelt with Anthony J. McGann, *The Radical Right in Western Europe: A Comparative Analysis* (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 1995).

8 It is important to note that black (but not Hispanic) Americans are excluded from these calculations. Indeed, blacks stand as a notable exception to all the general partisan patterns identified here, remaining overwhelmingly Democratic regardless of religiosity (and income, for that matter). The significance of this reality will be discussed later.

9 The declining role of affluence in motivating Republican vote choice is reflected not only at the individual level, but at the state level as well. In the 2000 election, George Bush won all five of the poorest states in the union (West Virginia, Arkansas, Mississippi, Louisiana, and Montana), and all but

one (New Mexico, which he barely lost) of the 10 poorest. Conversely, Gore won seven of the 10 wealthiest states (with Alaska, Colorado, and Virginia being the exceptions).

10 Indeed, religiosity is likely one factor mitigating the gender gap, as women are over-represented among frequent church attenders.

11 This political cooperation of orthodox Christians across sectarian lines reflects a trend over the past several decades in which denominational divisions have become less important, both socially and politically. For more on this phenomenon, see Robert Wuthnow, *The Restructuring of American Religion: Society and Faith since World War II* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1988).

12 The categorization of Protestant denominations into the broad religious traditions of mainline (Episcopalian, Methodist, Presbyterian, etc.) and evangelical (Baptist, Church of Christ, Pentecostal, etc.) follows the classification scheme outlined in John C. Green, James L. Guth, Lyman A. Kellstedt, and Corwin E. Smidt, *Religion and the Culture Wars: Dispatches from the Front* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 1996).

13 For a model of gradual, group-based partisan realignment over time, see V.O. Key, "Secular Realignment and the Party System," *Journal of Politics* 21 (1959): 198-210.

14 It is important to note that these groups do not represent radical or extremist outliers. For every question, at least 20 percent of the total sample strongly agreed and at least 20 percent strongly disagreed.

15 The figures presented here are based on data from James L. Guth, Lyman A. Kellstedt, John C. Green, and Corwin E. Smidt, "America Fifty/Fifty," *First Things* 116 (2001): 19-26 as well as from the 2000 American National Election Study.

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