

# *The Forum*

---

*Volume 2, Issue 4*

2004

*Article 3*

POST-ELECTION 2004

---

## Terrorism, Gay Marriage, and Incumbency: Explaining the Republican Victory in the 2004 Presidential Election

Alan Abramowitz\*

\*Emory University, [polsaa@emory.edu](mailto:polsaa@emory.edu)

Copyright ©2004 by the authors. All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording, or otherwise, without the prior written permission of the publisher, bepress. *The Forum* is produced by The Berkeley Electronic Press (bepress). <http://www.bepress.com/forum>

# Terrorism, Gay Marriage, and Incumbency: Explaining the Republican Victory in the 2004 Presidential Election \*

Alan Abramowitz

## **Abstract**

An analysis of the 2004 presidential election results indicates that President Bush's relatively narrow victory reflected the normal advantage of incumbency and preexisting divisions within the American electorate rather than a fundamental shift in the partisan or ideological loyalties of the electorate. There was little change in the public's attitudes toward Mr. Bush or the political parties during the campaign and gay marriage referenda had no discernible impact on either voter turnout or support for the President. However, Mr. Bush did somewhat better than expected in the states most directly affected by the September 11th terrorist attacks.

**KEYWORDS:** elections, presidency, political parties, voting

---

\*Alan I. Abramowitz is the Alben W. Barkley Professor of Political Science at Emory University in Atlanta, Georgia. He received his B.A. from the University of Rochester in 1969 and his Ph.D. from Stanford University in 1976. Dr. Abramowitz has authored or coauthored four books, dozens of contributions to edited volumes, and more than forty articles in political science journals dealing with political parties, elections, and voting behavior in the United States. His most recent book, *Voice of the People: Elections and Voting Behavior in the United States*, was published in 2004 by McGraw-Hill.

In 2004, for the first time since 1928, a Republican President was reelected along with Republican majorities in the Senate and House of Representatives. President Bush's margins in both the popular and the electoral vote were relatively narrow. Mr. Bush won 50.7 percent of the popular vote and 286 electoral votes to 48.3 percent of the popular vote and 252 electoral votes for his Democratic challenger, Massachusetts Senator John Kerry. Despite the closeness of the election, however, the fact that Mr. Bush was the first presidential candidate to win a majority of the popular vote since his father in 1988, the Republican gains in the Senate and House of Representatives, and a dramatic increase in voter turnout have fueled speculation that this was an extraordinary election with potentially long-lasting consequences for American politics.

Some conservative strategists and pundits have argued that the 2004 results may signal the beginning of an era of Republican domination of Congress and the presidency. Ken Mehlman, President Bush's campaign manager and the incoming chairman of the Republican National Committee, recently claimed that, "The Republican Party is in a stronger position today than at any time since the Great Depression." According to Mehlman, "something fundamental and significant happened in this election that creates an opportunity" for the Republican Party to maintain and extend its gains in future elections (Harris 2004, p. A-1).

According to Mehlman and other conservative commentators, George Bush's victory in 2004, along with GOP gains in the House and Senate, were based a successful two-pronged strategy: (1) emphasizing the need for strong leadership to counter the threat of terrorism, and (2) mobilizing millions of evangelical Christians and other culturally conservative voters upset about gay marriage, abortion, and other threats to traditional values. By aggressively pursuing the war on terrorism and by enacting policies such as a constitutional amendment prohibiting gay marriage and additional restrictions on abortion, these conservatives now believe that President Bush and the Republican Congress can solidify the party's newly expanded base and ensure GOP control of Congress and the White House for years to come. Some scholars appear to agree with this assessment. Walter Dean Burnham, one of the nation's leading experts on past party realignments recently observed that, "If Republicans keep playing the religious card along with the terrorism card, this could last a long time" (Harris, p. A-1).

Of course, not everyone accepts the argument that 2004 was a realigning election. Liberal political analysts such as Ruy Teixeira of the Center for American Progress, while acknowledging the significance of Republican victories in the presidential and congressional elections, tend to emphasize the limited nature of the GOP's gains and attribute Bush's reelection mainly to skillful use of advantage of incumbency in a time of war. According to Teixeira, "It's hard to read [the results] in a serious way as a mandate for much of anything." Similarly,

according to political scientist Larry Bartels of Princeton University, support for the GOP by culturally conservative white voters in 2004 was consistent with their behavior in other recent elections and did not signal any major shift within the electorate (Harris, p. A-1).

### **The Evidence**

It will take years to determine whether the 2004 election signaled the beginning of a new era of Republican domination of American politics or whether it was simply a normal election in an era of intense competition for the support of a closely divided electorate. Hopefully, the data from the 2004 American National Election Study, once they become available to the scholarly community, will shed some light on this question. In the rest of this paper, however, I will attempt to address several questions about the significance of the 2004 election by examining the evidence that is already available from the election results themselves along with the 2004 national exit poll.

First, how surprising was George Bush's victory in the 2004 presidential election? The answer, based on the historical record, is not surprising at all. In the century preceding the 2004 election, 20 incumbent presidents have sought reelection. Fifteen out of 20 were successful, for a success rate of 75 percent. Incumbent presidents usually win. Moreover, incumbent presidents like George Bush whose party has held the White House for only one term almost always win (Abramowitz 1989). In the past century, 10 of 11 such first-term presidents have been reelected. The only failure was Jimmy Carter in 1980. Other than Carter, George Bush received the smallest share of both the popular and electoral vote of any first-term incumbent since 1900.

What about the dramatic increase in voter turnout in 2004? 122.2 million Americans voted in the 2004 presidential election, an increase of almost 17 million compared with the 105.4 million who voted in the 2000 presidential election. Even so, the estimated turnout of eligible voters in 2004 was only 59.9 percent, up from 54.2 percent in 2000, but below the 60.6 percent turnout in 1992 as well as the turnout for all three of the presidential elections during the 1960s.

A more important question about voter turnout in the 2004 election is who voted. Did the Republican Party in fact mobilize millions of evangelical Christians by emphasizing its opposition to gay marriage? Certainly one key element in the Republicans' "gay marriage strategy" involved the placement of anti-gay marriage referenda on the ballots in 11 states. By placing these referenda on the ballot, the GOP hoped to increase turnout among evangelicals and other social conservatives who would also vote for George Bush and Republican congressional candidates.

An examination of turnout data from the states suggests, however, that the strategy of using gay marriage referenda to increase turnout was ineffective. In the 11 states with gay marriage referenda on the ballot, turnout of eligible voters increased by an average of 5.1 percentage points, from 55.9 percent in 2000 to 61.0 percent in 2004. In the rest of the country, turnout increased by an average of 4.4 percentage points, from 57.3 percent in 2000 to 61.7 percent in 2004. Moreover, a multiple regression analysis of turnout in the states in 2004 shows that the presence of gay marriage referenda on the ballot had no impact on turnout. Based on the results summarized in Table 1, the strongest predictor of turnout in 2004 was turnout in 2000. In addition, 12 swing states—the states that were heavily contested by both presidential candidates until the end of the campaign—saw their turnouts increase by a statistically significant 3.7 points beyond what was predicted based on their turnout levels in 2000, and nine states with hotly contested Senate races saw a more modest increase in turnout of just over one percentage point. However, turnout in states with gay marriage referenda on the ballot was no higher than expected.

**Table 1. Regression Analysis of Turnout in 2004**

**Model Summary**

Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate
1	.963 <sup>a</sup>	.927	.921	1.6954

a. Predictors: (Constant), SENATE, MARRIAGE, SWING, TURN00

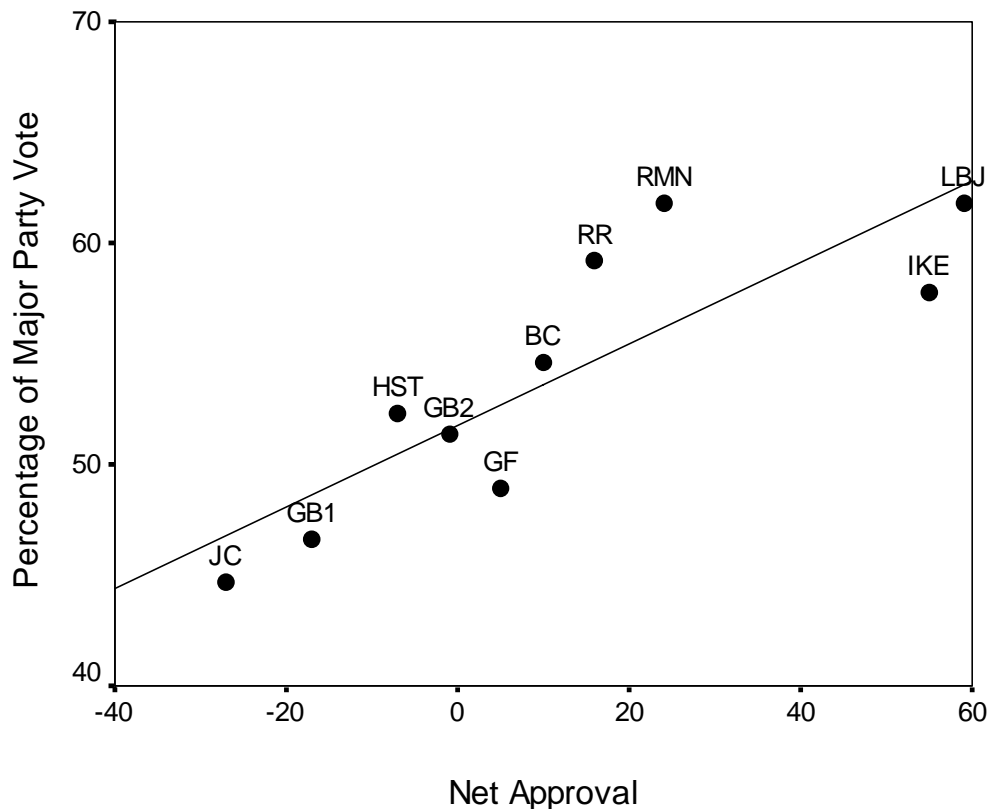
**Coefficients<sup>a</sup>**

Model		Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	t	Sig.
		B	Std. Error	Beta		
1	(Constant)	14.963	2.192		6.827	.000
	TURN00	.797	.038	.862	20.764	.000
	MARRIAGE	.359	.581	.025	.618	.540
	SWING	3.699	.581	.263	6.363	.000
	SENATE	1.133	.623	.072	1.818	.076

a. Dependent Variable: TURN04

Was George Bush's victory the result of a brilliantly planned and executed campaign strategy and/or a deeply flawed strategy on the part of the Kerry campaign? If so, one would expect to find that Bush did substantially better than he should have done based on his level of public support before the main phase of the general election campaign began. But he did not. Figure 1 shows the results of a regression analysis of the vote received by all 10 incumbent presidents since World War II based on their net approval rating (percent approving minus percent disapproving) in the final Gallup Poll in June of the election year, before the Fall

Figure 1.  
Vote for Incumbent President by Late June Approval Rating

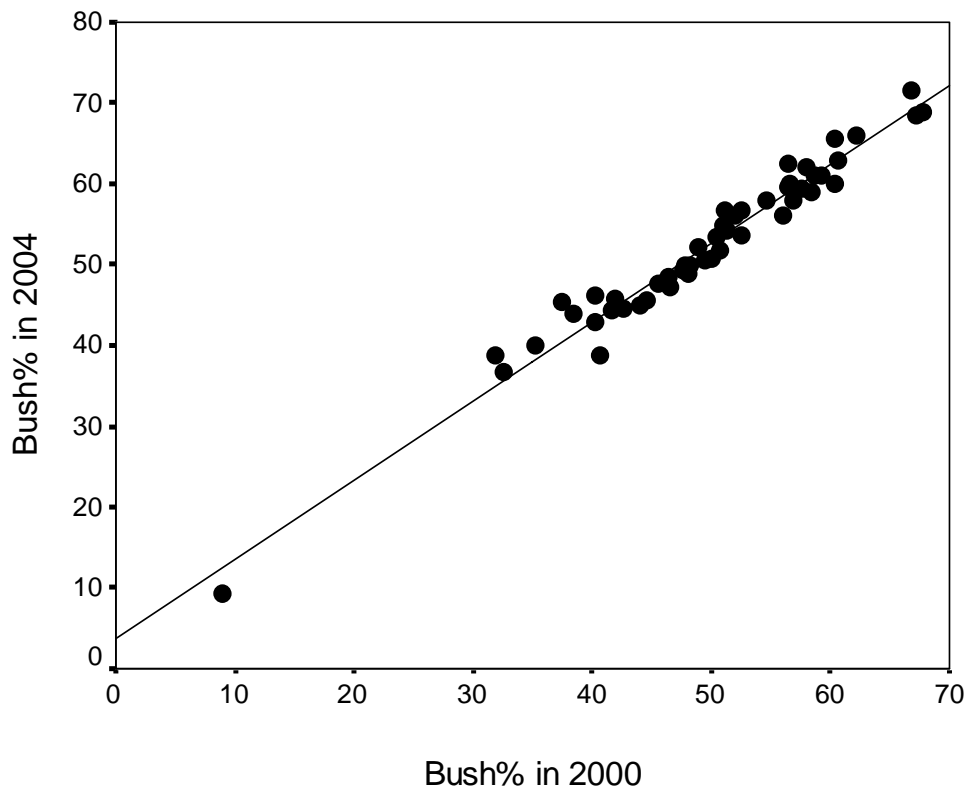


campaign had begun. This analysis shows that there is a fairly strong relationship between a president's approval rating in June and his vote in November. However, the relationship is not perfect. Some presidents, like Richard Nixon and Ronald Reagan, do somewhat better than expected, perhaps because their popularity increased during the campaign or they faced weak challengers. Other presidents, like Dwight Eisenhower and Gerald Ford do a little worse than

expected, perhaps because their popularity decreased during the campaign or they faced strong challengers. But the point for George W. Bush falls right on the regression line. Bush did exactly as well as expected based on his approval rating in June. There is no indication here that the election outcome reflected a brilliantly executed campaign by the Republicans or a flawed campaign by the Democrats. Rather, the outcome of the 2004 presidential election reflected the basic divisions in the country before the campaign began.

The results of the 2004 presidential election also closely reflected the results of the 2000 presidential election. Only three small states switched sides between 2000 and 2004: New Hampshire went from the Republican column to the Democratic column while Iowa and New Mexico went from the Democratic column to the Republican column. But in all three states, the race was extremely close in both 2000 and 2004. Figure 2 shows that there was a very strong relationship between the results of the 2000 and 2004 presidential elections across all of the states. George Bush ran slightly ahead of his 2000 percentage in almost

Figure 2. Bush% in 2004 by Bush% in 2000



every state. He gained an average of 2.6 percentage points in states that he carried four years earlier and he gained an average of 2.8 percentage points in states that Al Gore carried four years earlier; he gained an average of 2.7 percentage points in states with below average unemployment and he gained an average of 2.6 percentage points in states with above average unemployment; he gained an average of 2.5 percentage points in states with gay marriage referenda on the ballot and he gained an average of 2.7 percentage points in states without gay marriage referenda on the ballot. There was, however, one exception to the rule of consistent gains for George Bush between 2000 and 2004. Mr. Bush gained an average of 5.4 percentage points in the three states most directly affected by the September 11<sup>th</sup> terrorist attacks—New York, New Jersey, and Connecticut—compared with 2.5 percentage points in the rest of the country.

Table 2 displays the results of a regression analysis of George Bush's percentage of the vote in the states in 2004. The independent variables in this analysis are Bush's percentage of the vote in 2000, a dummy variable for states with gay marriage referenda, a dummy variable for the three states in the New York metropolitan area which were most directly affected by the September 11<sup>th</sup> attacks, the estimated turnout of eligible voters in 2004, and the unemployment rate in the state prior to the election.

**Table 2. Regression Analysis of Bush Vote in 2004**

**Model Summary**

Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate
1	.987 <sup>a</sup>	.975	.972	1.74155

a. Predictors: (Constant), UNEMP04, SEPT11, TURN04, MARRIAGE, BUSH00

**Coefficients<sup>a</sup>**

Model		Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	t	Sig.
		B	Std. Error	Beta		
1	(Constant)	12.289	3.243		3.789	.000
	BUSH00	.990	.027	.993	37.160	.000
	MARRIAGE	5.482E-02	.637	.002	.086	.932
	SEPT11	2.820	1.083	.065	2.603	.012
	TURN04	-.132	.041	-.077	-3.223	.002
	UNEMP04	-.235	.239	-.025	-.982	.331

a. Dependent Variable: BUSH04

The results of the regression analysis demonstrate that by far the strongest predictor of George Bush's vote in 2004 was his vote in 2000. Gay marriage referenda and unemployment had no impact on the results of the 2004 presidential election in the states. However, George Bush did significantly better than expected in the three states most directly affected by the September 11<sup>th</sup> attacks. Finally, the level of voter turnout in a state had a significant negative impact on Bush's vote—the president did better than expected in states with relatively low levels of turnout and worse than expected in states with relatively high levels of turnout after controlling for his performance in those states four years earlier.

These results lend a bit of support to the effectiveness of one part of the Republican strategy in the 2004 election. The fact that George Bush did significantly better than expected in the three states most affected by September 11<sup>th</sup> suggests that the Republican strategy of emphasizing the continuing threat of terrorism and the President's strong leadership in the war on terrorism was somewhat effective. Although George Bush lost all three of these states by wide margins, these results suggest that the issue of terrorism probably contributed to the smaller gains that the President made in the rest of the country. However, the fact that Mr. Bush did worse than expected in states with relatively high voter turnout in 2004 suggests that increased turnout did not contribute to his victory. Whatever success the Republican campaign had in mobilizing conservative evangelicals and other pro-Bush voters was apparently more than offset by the success of the Democratic campaign in mobilizing African-Americans, college students, and other anti-Bush voters.

The 2004 presidential election was largely a referendum on the performance of President Bush and voters were almost evenly divided in their assessment of that performance. According to the national exit poll, 22 percent of the voters were "enthusiastic" about the Bush Administration, 26 percent were "satisfied," 26 percent were "dissatisfied," and 23 percent were "angry." The overwhelming majority of those who were enthusiastic or satisfied voted for the President; the overwhelming majority of those who were dissatisfied or angry voted against the President. Opinions about Mr. Bush fell largely along party lines and showed little change during the campaign. In fact, they were almost identical to opinions about Mr. Bush in the aftermath of the disputed 2000 election and before the September 11<sup>th</sup> attacks.

There was also very little change in the party loyalties of the electorate between 2000 and 2004. Table 3 compares the distribution of party identification among registered voters in the U.S. during 2004 with the distribution during 2000 according to the National Annenberg Election Surveys. These results are based on interviews with almost 45,000 registered voters during 2000 and almost 68,000 during 2004. There was almost no change. Democrats enjoyed a three point advantage in party identification during 2004 compared with a four point

advantage during 2000 and there were slightly fewer independent during 2004 than during 2000.

**Table 3. Party Identification of Registered Voters in 2000 and 2004**

Party Identification	2000	2004	Change
Democratic	34%	35%	+ 1%
Republican	30	32	+ 2
Independent, Other	36	33	- 3

Source: National Annenberg Election Surveys. 2004 results based on interviews with 67,777 registered voters between Oct. 7, 2003 and Nov. 16, 2004. 2000 results based on interviews with 44,877 registered voters between Dec. 14, 1999 and Jan. 19, 2001.

### Conclusions

The consistency of the results of the 2000 and 2004 elections along with the stability of voters' party loyalties and evaluations of President Bush argue against the idea that the Republican victory in the 2004 presidential election represented some sort of breakthrough for the GOP. In the aftermath of the 2004 election, the divisions within the American electorate appear to be almost identical to the divisions that existed following the 2000 election, only deeper. Moreover, given the commitment of the Bush Administration to continuing to press its conservative policy agenda, it is very unlikely that these divisions will weaken significantly in the next four years. Although George Bush himself will not be on the ballot, the 2008 presidential election will likely be another referendum on Mr. Bush's policies and performance and, with the advantage of incumbency removed, one that could clearly go either way.

### References

- Abramowitz, Alan I. 1988. An Improved Model for Predicting Presidential Election Outcomes. *PS: Political Science and Politics*, 21: 843-846.
- Harris, John F. 2004. '04 Voting: Realignment – Or a Tilt? *Washington Post*, December 17, p. A-1.