

The Armageddon Election:

Bush vs. Kerry and the New Partisan Era

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A Special Report for Zogby International Clients

April 26, 2004

It was a tough, competitive election. As was the case four years earlier, this year's presidential race was characterized by vitriolic rhetoric that further polarized an already alienated and exhausted public. Opponents described the incumbent president's tenure as "one continued tempest of malignant passions," while the president's defenders responded that "everything must give way to the great object of excluding" his challenger from the White House.¹ On election night, the contest was decided by a handful of votes in a single state. The winner. . . *Thomas Jefferson*.

There are many parallels between the George W. Bush-John Kerry race of 2004 and the partisan fervor that roiled the John Adams-Thomas Jefferson contest of 1800. For starters, the Adams-Jefferson fight was a continuation of a bitter rivalry that began in 1796. That election was the first open-seat race for the presidency after George Washington's abdication. John Adams—the standard-bearer for the Federalist Party—and Thomas Jefferson—the nominee of the newly-formed Democratic Party—fought to a 71-68 near-draw in the Electoral College—much as George W. Bush and Al Gore did in 2000.² In each case, the electoral college split reflected a profound geographical division. Adams's strength lay in his native New England—the Blue States of their day—while Jefferson's strength was in the South—the Red States of their time. What clinched the election for Adams was his New York State win—the 1796 version of Florida. But Adams's victory hardly cooled voter passions. Political writer and ardent Democrat, James

¹ James Callender quoted in David McCullough, *John Adams* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2001), p. 537. Alexander Hamilton, quoted in 1796. See Stefan Lorant, *The Presidency* (New York: Macmillan Company, 1951), p. 40.

² Bush received 271 electoral votes to Gore's 266. One Washington, D.C. elector refrained from voting for Gore in order to protest the District of Columbia's lack of statehood.

Callender, expressed the bitterness felt by many of Jefferson's partisans toward the new president:

The historian will search for those *occult* causes that induced her to exalt an individual [John Adams] who has neither that innocence of sensibility which incites it to love, nor that omnipotence of intellect which commands us to admire. He will ask why the United States degrades themselves to the choice of a wretch whose soul came blasted from the hand of nature, of a wretch that has neither the science of a magistrate, the politeness of a courier, not the courage of a man?³

As was the case following George W. Bush's election (or as Democrats like to say "selection") in 2000, the passions that inflamed John Adams's victory in 1796 had not cooled four years later, and the two parties conducted the first of their many "permanent campaigns."⁴ With Adams ensconced in the White House, Jefferson secured the backing of New York's Democratic senator Aaron Burr, and he arranged to have Burr become his vice president by creating a tie in the already-creaky electoral college.⁵ This marriage of convenience was

³ Quoted in McCullough, *John Adams*, p. 537.

⁴ For more on the development of the permanent campaign see Sidney Blumenthal, *The Permanent Campaign* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1982).

⁵ In 1796, under the peculiar rules of the electoral college, the runner-up in the presidential contest became vice president. Jefferson, who had served as Adams's vice president,

cemented by their mutual opposition to the Federalist-backed Alien and Sedition Acts—controversial laws whose criticisms are echoed in the today’s debates surrounding the Patriot Act. The 1798 Sedition Act made it a misdemeanor to publish false or malicious information, and provided that anyone convicted of conspiring to hinder the operations of the federal government would be subject to heavy fines and possible imprisonment. The Alien Acts, which became law in the same year, made it easier to deport political adversaries who were not citizens.

Jefferson and his Democratic Party followers came to believe that Adams and his Federalist Party were endangering the civil liberties that the American Revolution had been fought to acquire. Adams’s partisans responded that the elevation of a culturally alien Jefferson—whom they denounced as an atheist and a miscegenationist—would lead the country into a civil and cultural war. In 1800, Alexander Hamilton, a Federalist, declared that his party’s candidates for president and vice president should be supported equally, since this was “the only thing that can save us from the fangs of *Jefferson*.”⁶ Or, as the *Gazette of the United States* headlined, “GOD—AND A RELIGIOUS PRESIDENT; OR. . .JEFFERSON—AND NO GOD!!!”⁷

Given such inflammatory rhetoric, it is not surprising that the reprise of the Adams-Jefferson contest was both close and controversial. In three states (Massachusetts, Pennsylvania,

did not want a rival in the office, and he arranged for an electoral college tie with the understanding that Burr would become vice president. That happened when both Jefferson and Burr received 73 electoral votes apiece. Burr eventually reneged on the bargain, and the election was decided in the House of Representatives.

⁶ Quoted in A. James Reichley, *The Life of the Parties: A History of American Political Parties* (New York: Free Press, 1992), p. 54.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 56.

and New Hampshire), the popular vote was discarded and the electors—all Federalists—were appointed by the Federalist-controlled state legislatures.⁸ In Rhode Island, the popular vote was instituted for the first time—a harbinger of things to come. Virginia shifted its electoral vote count to a winner-take-all system in order to maximize support for Jefferson. But as was the case in 1796, the election hinged upon a single state: New York. In May of 1800, Abigail Adams—whom historian Joseph Ellis described as “the designated vote counter on the Adams team”—predicted that “New York will be the balance in the scaile [sic, authors’ note: she meant scale].”⁹ Unlike 1796, Jefferson and Burr came away with New York’s twelve votes, thanks to Burr’s canvass of the state. It need not have turned out this way. A switch of just 250 votes in New York City would have swung the election to Adams.¹⁰ The resultant electoral college deadlock between Jefferson and Burr was settled after numerous ballots in the House of Representatives when Federalist leader Alexander Hamilton concluded that his longtime nemesis, Jefferson, was preferable to the scheming Burr.¹¹

⁸ Adams won all the electors from Massachusetts and New Hampshire, and an 8-7 plurality in Pennsylvania.

⁹ Joseph J. Ellis, *Founding Brothers: The Revolutionary Generation* (New York: Vintage Books, 2000), p. 203.

¹⁰ See McCullough, *John Adams*, p. 556.

¹¹ The U.S. Constitution provides that if a candidate fails to secure a majority in the electoral college, each state delegation casts a single vote for president. The candidate who wins a majority of the states becomes president.

Reflecting on the election result, Adams told fellow Federalist Elbridge Gerry (whom the term “gerrymander” is named after), “How mighty is the spirit of party.”¹² Years later, Jefferson concurred that it was the spirit of party that had separated these two founding brothers:

[In 1800], the line of division was again drawn, we broke into two parties, each wishing to give a different direction to the government; the one to strengthen the most popular branch, the other the more permanent branches, and to extend their performance. . . . [A]s we had been longer than most in the public theatre, and our names were more familiar to our countrymen, the party which considered you as thinking with them placed your name at the head: the other for the same reason selected mine. . . . We suffered ourselves, as you so well expressed it, to be the passive subjects of public discussion. And these discussions, whether relating to men, measures, or opinions, were conducted by the parties with an animosity, a bitterness, and an indecency, which had never been exceeded. . . . To me, then, it appears that there have been differences of opinion, and party differences, from the first establishment of governments, to the present day; and on the same question which now divides our own country: that these will continue thro’ all future time: that everyone takes his side in favor

¹² Quoted in McCullough, *John Adams*, p. 557.

of the many, or the few, according to his constitution, and the circumstances in which he is placed.¹³

In many ways, the Bush-Kerry race is characterized by the same divisions of ideology and cultural outlook that have characterized American politics since its founding. These divisions have produced a series of gaps that are easily found in the polling data assessing the 2004 match-up. For example, in the latest Zogby International poll conducted from April 15-17, 2004, there is a *marriage gap*. Married voters prefer Bush by 10 points (Bush, 51 percent; Kerry, 41 percent); single voters back Kerry by 22 points (Kerry, 57 percent; Bush, 35 percent). There is a *religious gap*. Those who say they are “born again” give Bush a 28-point advantage (Bush, 61 percent; Kerry, 33 percent). Among those who haven’t had this kind of religious experience, Kerry leads by 13 points (Kerry, 52 percent; Bush, 39 percent). The *gender gap*, which made its first appearance in the 1980 Reagan-Carter contest, is back with a vengeance: 49 percent of men support Bush; 44 percent back Kerry. Among women, Kerry has a decisive lead: 50 percent back Kerry; 39 percent prefer Bush. There is a *racial gap*, with whites backing Bush by 8 points (Bush, 50 percent; Kerry, 42 percent); among blacks, the gap widens to 78 points in Kerry’s favor (Kerry, 84 percent; Bush, 6 percent). And, as was the case in both of the Adams-Jefferson contests, there is a *regional gap*. The Red States—those that supported George W. Bush in 2000—back him once more with 52 percent of their votes to Kerry’s 42 percent. But the Blue

¹³ Quoted in Ellis, *Founding Brothers*, p. 231.

States—those that sided with Al Gore—remain Democratic Country: 53 percent back Kerry; 36 percent support Bush.¹⁴

But like the Adams-Jefferson contests, the most important gap in this year's Bush-Kerry race is the partisan one. Bush leads Kerry among self-described Republicans by **71 points** (83 percent back Bush; 12 percent support Kerry). But among Democrats, Kerry wins by **66 points** (Kerry, 78 percent; Bush, 12 percent). To speak either of a “George W. Bush Democrat,” or a “John Kerry Republican” is to describe an endangered species. This is quite unlike 1988, when George H. W. Bush ran against another Massachusetts Democrat, Michael S. Dukakis. Back then, nearly one-in-five Democrats defected from Dukakis to back the elder Bush.¹⁵ Such cross-party pollination was hardly new. In 1964, millions of moderate Republicans deserted their party to back Lyndon B. Johnson in his race against Barry Goldwater. Eight years later, one-third of Democrats bolted their party to back Richard M. Nixon when he ran against George McGovern. And in both of the Reagan contests in 1980 and 1984, one-in-four Democrats sided with the Republican nominee.¹⁶ Indeed, much was made of the so-called “Reagan Democrats,” who shared Reagan’s disdain of government and liked his cultural conservatism.

While the partisanship that characterizes the Bush-Kerry race may be transcended by unforeseen events—e.g., the capture and or killing of Osama bin Laden, the possibility of another

¹⁴ Zogby International, survey, April 15-17, 2004. These results exclude Ralph Nader.

¹⁵ ABC News, exit poll, 1988. Eighteen percent of self-described Democrats backed George H. W. Bush.

¹⁶ CBS News, exit polls, 1972; ABC News, exit polls, 1980 and 1984.

terrorist attack on U.S. soil, or decisive actions on the ground in Iraq—it is highly likely that the outcome will rest on the relative strength of the two parties. That makes 2004 akin to 2000, when the Democratic Party’s successful ground game helped Al Gore eke out a half-million popular vote plurality.¹⁷ Republicans countered by improving their get-out-the-vote efforts in 2002.

If these trends continue, it seems clear that 2004 marks a new era of partisanship. This new era actually began with Bill Clinton’s 1992 victory, and has become entrenched during the past dozen years. The current period is markedly different—both from what the Founding Fathers intended, or what once passed for “normal” from the mid-twentieth century to that era’s final decade, as explained below.

Historical Eras in Presidential Selection

The Civic-Minded Presidency, 1789-1797

Throughout American history, there have been four different types of presidents. The first was that envisioned by the Founding Fathers: *the civic-minded chief executive*. The often criticized and much maligned electoral college was created by the framers to insure the selection of high-minded presidents whose character would be above reproach. Writing in *The Federalist Papers*, Alexander Hamilton maintained that the electoral college would insure the “constant probability” that the presidency would be “filled by characters pre-eminent for ability and

¹⁷ Gore received 50,999,897 votes (48.38 percent) to Bush’s 50,456,002 votes (47.87 percent).

virtue.” Like his contemporaries, Hamilton decried political parties as engaged in “the little arts of popularity,” and added that “the true test of government is its aptitude and tendency to produce a good administration”—which the nonpartisan electoral college would insure.¹⁸ James Madison, agreed, writing that any chance of achieving such an admirable government rested on “breaking and controlling the violence of factions”—i.e., parties.¹⁹

But the framers’ conception of a civic-minded presidency was limited to one occupant: George Washington. Washington embodied the framers’ idealistic aspirations: a man whose character was above reproach, and whose call for national unification in the pursuit of the common good was respected and admired by all. To that end, Washington created a unity government with two of the country’s leading political rivals—Thomas Jefferson and Alexander Hamilton—occupying prominent posts in his Cabinet.²⁰ But Washington’s grand coalition eventually collapsed, as both Secretary of State Jefferson and Treasury Secretary Hamilton resigned in protest, each blaming the other for his departure. Only Washington’s persona was able to suspend the partisanship that came to characterize presidential politics, and that was already taking form. In 1792, as was the case four years earlier, Washington won a unanimous vote in the electoral college—the only president ever to achieve such a distinction.²¹ But even as

¹⁸ Alexander Hamilton, “Federalist 68,” in Alexander Hamilton, James Madison, and John Jay, *The Federalist Papers* (New York: Mentor Books, 1961), p. 414.

¹⁹ James Madison, “Federalist 10,” in Edward Meade Earle, ed., *The Federalist* (New York: Modern Library, 1937), p. 77.

²⁰ Hamilton served as Treasury Secretary; Jefferson as Secretary of State.

²¹ In 1820, one elector did not support James Madison, so as to preserve the distinction of having George Washington be the only president to achieve unanimity in the electoral college.

Washington won overwhelming favor, political controversies and a heated partisanship caused him to seriously reconsider seeking a second term. In a speech drafted but never given in 1792, Washington derided the emerging partisan split and pleaded for unity: “We are all children of the same country. . . [O]ur interest, however diversified in local and smaller matters, is the same in all the great and essential concerns of the nation.”²² Four years later, Washington renounced the presidency in his Farewell Address: “[The spirit of party] agitates the community with ill-founded jealousies and false alarms; kindles the animosity of one part against another; ferments occasional riot and insurrection. It opens the door to foreign influence and corruption, which finds a facilitated access to the government through the channels of party passions.”²³

Washington’s complaints about excessive partisanship have been echoed across the centuries—most recently by third-party candidates Ross Perot and Jesse Ventura in the 1990s, and consumer activist and erstwhile presidential candidate, Ralph Nader, in 2000 and 2004. But the reincarnation of the civic-minded presidency—though desired by many critics of the two-party system—has never happened.²⁴

²² Quoted in James Thomas Flexner, *Washington: The Indispensable Man* (New York: New American Library, 1974), p. 263.

²³ George Washington, Farewell Address, September 17, 1796. Reprinted as Senate Document Number 3, 102nd Congress, 1st session, 1991. Ironically, each year the partisan members of Congress assemble to hear once more Washington’s warning about the dangers of excessive partisanship.

²⁴ The closest reincarnation was when Republican Abraham Lincoln placed Democrat Andrew Johnson on his newly-formed Union Party ticket in 1864. After Lincoln’s assassination, Johnson found it impossible to govern, as the Republicans in Congress distrusted Johnson and impeached him. Talk of unity has resurfaced in 2004, with John Kerry floating the name of Arizona Republican John McCain as a vice presidential candidate on another so-called unity ticket.

The Partisan Presidency, 1828-1936

George Washington's failure to institutionalize a civic-minded presidency resulted in the creation of the thing he dreaded most: *the partisan presidency*. Its beginnings were apparent in the role partisanship played in the Adams-Jefferson contest of 1796, and the nascent party organizations that aided Jefferson's election in 1800. Though President Jefferson was able to temporarily suspend partisanship by giving the nation a grand vision—best exhibited by the Louisiana Purchase and the 1804 Lewis and Clark expedition to explore the newly acquired territory—partisanship became entrenched when Democrat Andrew Jackson fought back to win the presidency in 1828—this after another electoral college misfire in 1824.²⁵ Jackson's vice president, Martin van Buren, who succeeded Jackson to the presidency in 1836, celebrated the rise of partisan politics, writing in his autobiography:

. . . political parties are inseparable from free governments. . .
 .Doubtless excesses frequently attend them and produce many
 evils, but not so many as are prevented by the maintenance of their
 organization and vigilance. The disposition to abuse power, so
 deeply planted in the human heart, can by no other means be more
 effectually checked; and it has always therefore struck me as more
 honorable and manly and more in harmony with the character of

²⁵ In 1824, five candidates sought the presidency. While Jackson won a majority of the popular vote and a plurality in the electoral college, the House of Representatives selected John Quincy Adams after one of Jackson's rivals, Henry Clay, announced his support of Adams who, in turn, named Clay to be his Secretary of State. Jackson's supporters were angry and denounced the appointment as a "corrupt bargain."

our People and of our Institutions to deal with the subject of Political Parties in a sincerer and wiser spirit—to recognize their necessity, to give them the credit they deserve, and to devote ourselves to improve and to elevate the principles and objects of our own and to support it ingeniously and faithfully.²⁶

The partisan presidency was sustained by the creation of a patronage system that rewarded the party faithful with government jobs. Even those who denounced the spoils system used it once they attained power. For example, when Whig Zachary Taylor assumed the presidency in 1849, he received a letter from fellow party member Abraham Lincoln, who complained that the postmaster in the city of Springfield, Illinois should be replaced. As Lincoln wrote: “J. R. Diller, the present incumbent, I cannot say has failed in the proper discharge of any of the duties of the office. He, however, has been an active partizan in opposition to us. . .[and] he has been a member of the Democratic State Central Committee.”²⁷

The patronage system was dealt an initial blow with the enactment of a civil service law following the assassination of James Garfield in 1881 by a disappointed office-seeker. It later received a death knell from Franklin D. Roosevelt’s New Deal, when many government jobs were folded into the civil service. Still, the era of partisan politics had a long reign, from Andrew Jackson’s victory in 1828 to Franklin D. Roosevelt’s reelection victory in 1936. These were

²⁶ Martin Van Buren, *The Autobiography of Martin Van Buren*, ed., John C. Firtzpatrick (New York: Augustus M. Kelley, 1920), p. 125.

²⁷ Quoted in David Herbert Donald, *Lincoln* (New York: Touchstone Books, 1995), p. 138.

partisan presidents chosen by partisan voters who saw political parties as necessary instruments for instituting change in the body politic. This system was celebrated by Democrats and Republicans alike. Democrat Woodrow Wilson, who was elected to the presidency in 1912, campaigned on a platform that included a lower tariff, reform of the banking system, and greater federal regulation of the workplace (including limitations on child labor). Wilson heralded the victory that awarded him the presidency and Democrats control of both houses of Congress: “There has been a change of government. . . .No one can mistake the purpose for which the Nation now seeks to use the Democratic Party.”²⁸ Later, Wilson celebrated the “zest of parties [that] has held us together, [and] has made it possible for us to form and to carry out national programs.”²⁹ Wilson’s 1912 rival, Republican William Howard Taft, also glorified the two-party system: “In a proper system of party government, the members of each party must agree on certain main doctrines in respect to governmental policy and yield their views on the important ones, in order that they may have united action, and in order that these main and controlling doctrines, when the party is successful at the election and controls the Government, may furnish the guide for governmental action.”³⁰

From Jacksonian Democracy, to Woodrow Wilson’s New Freedoms, and Franklin D. Roosevelt’s New Deal, presidents did not implement their own agendas so much as to ratify a

²⁸ Woodrow Wilson, Inaugural Address, Washington, D.C., March 4, 1913.

²⁹ Quoted in Quoted in David E. Price, *Bringing Back the Parties* (Washington, D.C.: Congressional Quarterly Press, 1984), p. 103.

³⁰ William Howard Taft, *Popular Government* (New Haven: Yale University, 1913), p. 29.

program that had been promulgated in their party platforms. That ended with the onset of World War Two and the Cold War which created the plebiscitary presidency.

The Plebiscitary Presidency, 1940-1988

World War Two and the long Cold War that followed drastically altered the public's conception of the presidency. In 1940, as the war clouds gathered, Franklin D. Roosevelt brought two prominent Republicans into his cabinet: Henry Stimson, who became Secretary of War, and Frank Knox, who served as Navy Secretary.³¹ This was a marked departure from Roosevelt's denunciation of the GOP as controlled by "economic royalists" during his 1936 reelection campaign.³² Roosevelt declared that the overseas crisis (World War Two began in 1939) created unique conditions that caused him to interrupt his retirement plans and seek an unprecedented third term. In 1940 and 1944, FDR won reelection wearing his commander-in-chief hat, not his partisan one.

The euphoria surrounding the end of World War Two might have been accompanied by an eventual return to partisan "normalcy" had it not been for the Cold War. This four-decade-plus struggle with the Soviet Union and its communist ideology consumed much of America's psychological and physical energies.³³ As more Americans became attuned to the communist threat, there emerged a powerful feeling that partisanship must cease. "Politics ends at the

³¹ Knox served from 1940-1944; Stimson from 1940-1945.

³² See especially James MacGregor Burns, *Roosevelt: The Lion and the Fox* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, and World, 1956), p. 274.

³³ For more on this see John Kenneth White, *Still Seeing Red: How the Cold War Shapes the New American Politics* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1998).

water's edge" became a common refrain. In 1956, then-Undersecretary of Labor Arthur Larson penned a book titled *A Republican Looks at His Party*. In it, Larson wrote that an "Authentic American Center" was needed to combat the communist challenge: "Principles that we have always taken for granted as the air we breathe are now flatly denounced and denied over a large party of the world—the principles, for example, of the preeminence and the freedom and the sovereignty of the individual person." Larson ominously warned any potential dissenters from this new center, saying: "We are playing for keeps now, with staggering world responsibilities we cannot escape."³⁴ Accepting renomination in 1956, Dwight Eisenhower echoed his Cabinet secretary's desire for conformity by recasting the Republican Party away from partisanship and transforming it into what he termed a "one-interest party":

The Republican Party is again the rallying point of Americans of all callings, races, and incomes. They see in its broad, forward-moving, straight-down-the road, fighting program the best promise for their own steady progress toward a bright future. Some opponents have tried to call this a "one-interest party." Indeed, it is a one-interest party; and that one interest is the interest of every man, women, and child in America! And most surely, as long as the Republican party continues to be this kind of one-interest

³⁴ Arthur Larsen, *A Republican Looks at His Party* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1956), p. 14.

party—a one-universal interest party—it will continue to be the Party of the Future.³⁵

As the Cold War progressed, the president became the embodiment of American nationalism. In 1960, Theodore H. White wrote that the presidency had become an “entirely personal office.” White spoke reverently of “a hush, an entirely personal hush” that surrounded the presidency when it came to making the life or death issues that the Cold War imposed upon it. That silence, he noted, was “deepest in the Oval Office of the West Wing of the White House, where the president, however many his advisers, must sit alone.”³⁶

In this environment, presidential elections became entirely personal affairs. Political analyst Samuel Lubell termed these contests “total elections”—ones where presidents exercised nearly complete control of foreign policy and the economy in a manner designed to control the outcome: “[W]e have been plunged deep into an era of presidential management of our society.”³⁷ According to political scientist Theodore J. Lowi, these *plebiscitary presidents* were solo artists: “A candidate for president must be above party. A candidate for president must, in the language of the theater, be a ‘single.’”³⁸ With the near-complete absence of party,

³⁵ Dwight Eisenhower, Acceptance Speech, Republican National Convention, August 23, 1956.

³⁶ Theodore H. White, *The Making of the President, 1960* (New York: Atheneum House, 1961), pp. 409, 415.

³⁷ See Samuel Lubell, *The Future While It Happened* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1973), p. 39.

³⁸ Theodore J. Lowi, *The Personal President: Power Invested, Promise Unfulfilled* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1985), p. 113.

plebiscitary presidents often won by landslide margins. As Table 1 shows, of the top ten presidential landslides in American history, *five* occurred during the Cold War era.

Table 1			
The Top Ten Presidential Landslides in American History			
Year	Principal Candidates	Winner's Percentage of the Total Vote Cast	Winner's Margin (in percent) Over the Main Challenger
1964	<i>Johnson, Goldwater</i>	<i>61.1</i>	<i>22.6</i>
1972	<i>Nixon, McGovern</i>	<i>60.8</i>	<i>23.2</i>
1936	F. Roosevelt, Landon	60.8	24.3
1920	Harding, Cox	60.3	26.2
1984	<i>Reagan, Mondale</i>	<i>59.2</i>	<i>18.4</i>
1928	Hoover, Smith	58.2	17.4
1932	F. Roosevelt, Hoover	57.4	17.8
1956	<i>Eisenhower, Stevenson</i>	<i>57.4</i>	<i>15.4</i>
1904	T. Roosevelt, Parker	56.4	18.8
1952	<i>Eisenhower, Stevenson</i>	<i>55.1</i>	<i>10.7</i>

Source: Partially derived from Everett Carl Ladd, Jr. with Charles D. Hadley, *Transformations of the American Party System* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1975), p. 279. Bold indicates a Cold War-era landslide victory.

The Return of the Partisan Era, 1992-Present

Bill Clinton's election signaled a return to the partisan politics of the past. In 1992, Americans were disenchanted with George H. W. Bush, eyeing him as a Cold War president without a Cold War to prosecute. Bush admirably handled the post-Cold War transition, and he assembled a large coalition of countries that waged a successful war to oust Iraq's Saddam Hussein from Kuwait. But having accomplished these missions, Americans were restless. And they were concerned about the economic costs that a post-Cold war economy was extracting from them. Bill Clinton felt their pain, and he promised to guide the nation into a global future. As the first "baby boomer" to become president, Clinton's election signaled a generational shift, as the veterans of World War Two ceded the presidency to the baby-boomers.³⁹ (The Korean veterans, part of the so-called "silent generation" of the 1950s, were the only twentieth century war veterans to have no-one from their ranks become president.)

But Bill Clinton's "baby-boomer presidency" exacerbated an ongoing cultural war. In 1992, Patrick J. Buchanan told the delegates at the Republican National Convention that the duo of Clinton & Clinton (a reference to Bill Clinton and his wife, Hillary) would engender a profound cultural change:

The agenda Clinton & Clinton would impose on America—abortion on demand, a litmus test for the Supreme Court, homosexual rights, discrimination against religious schools, women in combat—that's change all right. But it is not the

³⁹ This was accentuated by Clinton's choice of a fellow baby-boomer, Al Gore, to join him on the Democratic ticket.

change America wants. . . .It is not the change we can tolerate in a nation that we still call God's country.⁴⁰

As the culture war intensified during the Clinton years, so, too, did the partisanship. Bill Clinton became infamous for his "war rooms," a tactic designed to issue an immediate responses to any Republican attack. Republicans also perfected their war games. The result was a vitriolic partisanship that animated voters on both sides. As neo-conservatism's intellectual founder, Irving Kristol, wrote: "There is no 'after the Cold War' for me. So far from having ended, my cold war has increased in intensity, as sector after sector of American life has been ruthlessly corrupted by the liberal ethos."⁴¹

Further intensifying the partisanship was a shift in electoral behavior. Southern Democrats—long alienated from the Democratic presidential party, thanks to its support of civil rights—deserted the party of their fathers and mothers in droves. As they did, the "Dixiecrat"—that cross-breed between conservative and nominal Democrat—became nearly as extinct as the dodo bird. Georgia Senator Zell Miller, who is heading Democrats for Bush in 2004, is among its last representatives.⁴² Likewise, Yankee Republicans, who savored balanced budgets and railed against government intrusion into their private lives, became alienated by a Republican Party that

⁴⁰ Quoted in E. J. Dionne, Jr., "Buchanan Heaps Scorn on Democrats," *Washington Post*, August 18, 1992, p. A-18.

⁴¹ Irving Kristol, *Neoconservatism: The Autobiography of an Idea* (New York: Free Press, 1995), p. 486.

⁴² See Zell Miller, *A National Party No More: The Conscience of a Conservative Democrat* (Macon, Georgia: Stroud and Hall, 2003).

was so animated by the culture wars that it formed alliances with Christian evangelicals who wanted government to impose their moral codes on private behavior—especially when it came to prohibiting things such as gay marriage.⁴³ Jim Jeffords, Vermont’s junior senator, left the Republican Party in 2001 complaining that it no longer stood for “moderation; tolerance; fiscal responsibility.”⁴⁴ Thanks to this increased polarization, no southern conservative Democrat can realistically hope to win that party’s presidential nomination, and no northern moderate (i.e., a social liberal, economic conservative) has much hope of ever winning the top slot on a Republican ticket.

The result is a form of political entrapment in which the presidency becomes a partisan office once more. As a consequence, presidents are presented with few opportunities to expand their bases of support. Bill Clinton won 43 percent of the popular vote in 1992, and got only six percent more of the vote four years later. Because nearly all of Clinton’s gains came from *within his own party*, he was unable to capture a majority of the electorate against a weak and inept opponent in Bob Dole. More importantly, as Tables 2, 3, and 4 show, for the first time in two decades Democrats were no longer willing to defect and support Republican presidential candidates.

⁴³ For more on this see John Kenneth White, *The Values Divide: American Politics and Culture in Transition* (Washington, D.C.: Congressional Quarterly Press, 2003).

⁴⁴ James Jeffords, “Statement Announcing He is Leaving the Republican Party,” Burlington, Vermont, May 24, 2001. See also James M. Jeffords, *My Declaration of Independence* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2001).

Table 2 Cross-Party Presidential Support in the Plebiscitary Era, 1972-1980 (in percentages).			
Party	1972 Nixon-McGovern	1976 Carter-Ford	1980 Reagan-Carter-Anderson
Republicans	93-6	9-90	86-9-4
Independents	65-33	43-54	55-30-12
Democrats	64-33	77-22	26-67-6

Source: 1972 and 1976 data from CBS News, exit poll surveys. 1980 data from CBS News/*New York Times*, exit poll surveys.

Table 3 Cross-Party Presidential Support in the Plebiscitary Era, 1984-1988 (in percentages)		
Party	1984 Reagan-Mondale	1988 Bush-Dukakis
Republicans	92-7	91-8
Independents	63-36	55-43
Democrats	25-74	17-82

Source: CBS News/*New York Times*, 1984 and 1988 exit poll surveys.

Table 4 Cross-Party Presidential Support in the New Partisan Era, 1992-2000 (in percentages).			
Party	1992 Clinton-Bush-Perot	1996 Clinton-Dole-Perot	2000 Bush-Gore-Nader
Republicans	10-73-7	13-80-6	90-8-1
Independents	38-32-30	43-35-17	46-45-7
Democrats	77-10-13	84-10-5	11-87-2

Source: 1992 data from Voter Research and Surveys, exit poll, survey; 1996 and 2000 data from Voter News Service, exit poll, surveys.

Unlike Bill Clinton, George W. Bush did have an opportunity to transcend the partisan divide following the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001. But, as the following makes clear, it is an opportunity that has been lost.

George W. Bush: The (un)Likable Partisan

George W. Bush ran in 2000 promising to be “a uniter [sic], not a divider.” But as John Kerry likes to observe, “Bush has become the great divider.”⁴⁵ As most polls of the impending Bush-Kerry race show—including those conducted by Zogby International—George W. Bush has made no gains between the 48 percent of the vote he received in 2000 and the 44-46 percent support he gets in today’s trial heats against Kerry.⁴⁶ This is quite unlike the Cold War era, when presidential support precipitously rose or fell since it was largely untethered to any political party (see Table 5).

In today’s reinvigorated party-based era, the ability of presidents to add to their base of support is inherently limited. Thus far in the Gallup poll match-ups between George W. Bush and John Kerry, each has hit a high of 55 percent and a low of 43 percent—glass ceilings that

⁴⁵ John Kerry, speech to the Democratic National Committee, Unity Dinner, March 25, 2004.

⁴⁶ See Zogby International, poll, April 15-17, 2004. In a head-to-head match-up, Bush receives 44 percent of the vote to John Kerry’s 47 percent with 7 percent undecided. In a contest that includes Ralph Nader the result is Bush, 45 percent; Kerry, 45 percent; Nader, 3 percent; undecided, 6 percent.

seem unlikely to be broken in the months ahead.⁴⁷ Given that neither party has a firm and reliable majority support, the consequence is a succession of minority presidents. George W. Bush is the third minority president in a row—a record not matched since the minority (and forgettable) presidents of the 1870s and 1880s. In this party-based era, another minority president is almost a certainty this year. *In sum, the era of landslides is over.*

⁴⁷ Gallup poll, January 9-11, 2004. This match-up showed Bush with 55 percent and Kerry with 43 percent and was taken prior to Kerry's breakout showing in Iowa. Gallup poll, February 16-17, 2004. This poll had Kerry with 55 percent and Bush with 43 percent and occurred during the period when Kerry was securing one primary victory after another.

Table 5 Presidential Support Differential from Previous Election, 1952-2004.		
Year	Winning Candidate and Percentage	Winning Party's Gain/Loss from Previous Election
1952	Eisenhower, 55.1	+10.0
1956	Eisenhower, 57.4	+2.3
1960	Kennedy, 49.7	+7.7
1964	Johnson, 61.1	+11.4
1968	Nixon, 43.4	+4.9
1972	Nixon, 60.7	+17.3
1976	Carter, 50.1	+12.6
1980	Reagan, 50.7	+2.7
1984	Reagan, 58.8	+8.1
1988	Bush, 53.4	-5.4
1992	Clinton, 43.0	-2.6
1996	Clinton, 49.2	+6.2
2000	Bush, 47.9	+7.2
2004	Bush, 43.8 Kerry, 46.7	-4.1/-1.2

Data for 1952-2000 derived from Alice V. McGillivray, Richard M. Scammon and Rhodes Cook, *America at the Polls, 1960-2000: John F. Kennedy to George W. Bush* (Washington, D.C.: Congressional Quarterly Press, 2001), p. 1. Data for 2004 is based on a Zogby International Survey poll, April 15-17, 2004. In this survey, Bush received 44 percent support, a 3-point drop from his 48 percent of the vote in 2000; John Kerry received 47 percent, a 1-point loss from Gore's popular percentage.

It did not have to turn out this way. George W. Bush's administration had the potential to be transformed into a warlike, plebiscitary presidency given the horrific terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001. In the early days of the new war, Bush rose above partisanship to give two very effective public addresses: one at the National Cathedral; the other before a joint session of Congress. The result was near-unanimity in support of the president and his leadership. Three weeks after the attacks, Bush's job approval rating rose to an astronomical 90 percent in the Gallup poll—a score that exceeded the all-time record of 89 percent posted by Bush's father during the Persian Gulf War.⁴⁸ Bush's strong persona resonated with the public long after the horrific events of September 11 were seared into the public's memory. A February 2003 *Los Angeles Times* poll found 71 percent characterizing Bush as a "strong and decisive leader." The same poll showed that more than three-quarters of the respondents said they liked Bush as a person, and 50 percent described themselves as either "hopeful" or "happy" that he was president.⁴⁹

As the country rallied behind Bush, it also unified in seeking to defeat Osama bin Laden and his al Qaeda terrorist organization. As a portion of Islamic fundamentalism mutated into a new form of international terrorism, it initially seemed as though the return of a Cold War-like, above-the-partisan-fray commander-in-chief was inevitable. The partisan Clinton era—replete with all of its partisan attacks and counterattacks—seemed like a distant memory.

⁴⁸ See David W. Moore, "Top Ten Gallup Presidential Approval Ratings," Gallup press release, September 24, 2001.

⁴⁹ *Los Angeles Times*, poll, January 30-February 2, 2003.

With the presumptive return of the plebiscitary presidency came a harkening back to the Lubell era of “total elections.” George W. Bush achieved a smashing midterm victory in 2002 when political advisor Karl Rove made a strategic decision to “run on the war.”⁵⁰ The result was a victory that gave the Republicans more seats in the House and saw the party retake control of the Senate.⁵¹ Voters tossed aside their doubts and indecision of 2000. This time, Americans cast “belated ballots” that affirmed Bush’s wartime leadership.

Americans came to like George W. Bush. In an earlier work, we dubbed him “the likable partisan.”⁵² But with the passage of time, the partisan divisions have returned with a vengeance. As a result, while each successive victory in the war against terror has produced a bump in the polls for Bush, both the rise in support and its duration have become smaller each time. For example, Bush’s job approval rating changed from a 49 percent positive and 51 percent negative rating before Saddam Hussein’s capture to 53 percent positive and 47 percent negative just after that welcome news.⁵³ But just five months later, Bush’s job approval has returned to its rather dismal 47 percent positive and 52 percent negative.⁵⁴ Moreover, Bush’s reelect numbers have

⁵⁰ See Richard A. Clarke, *Against All Enemies* (New York: Free Press, 2004), p. 186.

⁵¹ This was only the second time since 1934 that a president’s party had padded its congressional ranks in a midterm contest. The other was 1998, when Republicans overreached following the Monica Lewinsky scandal and sought Clinton’s impeachment—something most Americans did not favor, though they favored a congressional censure.

⁵² See John Kenneth White and John J. Zogby, “The Likable Partisan: George W. Bush and the Transformation of the American Presidency,” in Steven E. Schier, *High Risk and Big Ambition: The Presidency of George W. Bush* (Pittsburgh, University of Pittsburgh Press, 2004).

⁵³ Zogby International, polls, December 4-6, 2003 and December 15-16, 2003.

⁵⁴ Zogby International, poll, April 15-17, 2004.

been mired in the low-to-mid 40 percent range since August of last year (the current score is 43 percent reelect; time for someone new, 51 percent).⁵⁵ *As the 2004 election approaches, it is as if September 11 never happened.*

This return to partisanship was very evident during the Democratic presidential primaries. As voters left the polls, it was clear that while Democrats still had their differences, they were united in their antipathy toward George W. Bush. Primary voters in Iowa and New Hampshire, the places where the brunt of the Democratic attacks against Bush were most vitriolic, had their desired effect. According to Zogby polls, 50 percent of voters in these two states said they disliked Bush as a person.⁵⁶ Moreover, a plurality of voters in these and other states said they were either “angry” or “dissatisfied” with the Bush administration (see Table 6).

⁵⁵ Zogby International, poll, April 15-17, 2004.

⁵⁶ Zogby International, Iowa survey, September 8-9, 2003. Fifty percent said they disliked George W. Bush; only 35 percent liked him. Zogby International, New Hampshire survey, September 24-25, 2003. Fifty percent disliked George W. Bush; only 38 percent liked him.

Table 6				
Attitudes of Democratic Primary Voters toward the Bush Administration (in percentages).				
State	Angry	Dissatisfied	Satisfied	Enthusiastic
Arizona	46	37	13	3
California	49	35	11	4
Connecticut	58	32	8	1
Delaware	51	37	10	1
Florida	49	38	9	2
Georgia	32	43	13	8
Louisiana	33	41	16	8
Maryland	45	40	9	4
Massachusetts	51	35	9	3
Mississippi	35	50	20	5
Missouri	39	42	13	4
New Hampshire	46	37	14	2
New York	57	31	8	2
Ohio	44	39	12	2
Oklahoma	33	43	17	5
Rhode Island	57	32	7	2
South Carolina	35	49	11	2
Tennessee	39	45	11	3
Texas	42	38	14	5
Vermont	65	26	6	2
Virginia	44	42	8	4
Wisconsin	44	38	12	5

Source: Edison Media Research and Mitofsky International, exit polls.

For their part, Republicans are standing firm. Although both of us have heard lots of anecdotal evidence of Republican defectors to Kerry, such evidence has yet to appear in the survey research data. Not only are Republicans in lockstep behind Bush, they view Kerry very unfavorably: *5 percent* of Republicans have a “very favorable” impression of Kerry; 66 percent have a “very favorable” impression of Bush. Among Democrats, the figures are quite the opposite. While 50 percent have a “very unfavorable” opinion of Bush, Kerry has yet to inspire much ardor: 33 percent say they have a “very favorable” opinion of Kerry; 46 percent have a “somewhat favorable” impression. (Only 6 percent of Democrats say they have a “somewhat unfavorable” opinion of Kerry and just 5 percent say their view of the presumptive Democratic nominee is “very unfavorable.”)⁵⁷ Kerry’s task is to transform the Democrats’ loathing of Bush into loyalty and passion *for* him. For his part, Bush’s strategy of tending to his partisan base has extracted the maximum amount of fealty.

Events may change the course of the election. Another terrorist attack on American soil, the capture/killing of Osama bin Laden, or decisive events on the ground in Iraq have the potential to transform the 2004 election into one of Samuel Lubell’s “total elections.” For example, if another major terrorist attack were to occur on U.S. soil, the April 15-17, 2004 Zogby International poll finds that the country would rally around Bush and give him 50 percent of its votes to Kerry’s 39 percent.⁵⁸ (Note to Kerry: Take a leaf from Ronald Reagan’s play book and begin to prepare the public for a “October surprise.” In 1980, rumors spread that the Iranian hostages would be released prior to the November elections; they weren’t.)

⁵⁷Zogby International, poll, April 15-17, 2004.

⁵⁸ Zogby International, poll, April 15-17, 2004.

From E Pluribus Duo to E Pluribus Unum?

The partisan vitriol is likely to increase in the coming months. In many respects, the U.S. is moving toward an election system that has much in common with a parliamentary one. Never before has the opposition party settled on its presidential candidate so early. Gone are the days when the presidential campaign began with Labor Day rallies in Detroit's Cadillac Square and the public really began to focus on the candidates following the World Series. Now with a long and partisan campaign underway, Americans—quite unlike the political class—are dreading the upcoming campaign. A recent Fox News poll found only 27 percent saying they look forward to a Bush-Kerry race; 61 percent say they are dreading it. Moreover, 40 percent say the candidates have been “generally rude and disrespectful.”⁵⁹ If the election proceeds accordingly, it will be very difficult for the next president—whichever he may be—to govern. Recall that in 1992, 58 percent of voters told exit pollsters that they were either “concerned” or “scared” at the prospect of a Clinton presidency.⁶⁰ In 2000, 47 percent said they were either “concerned” or “scared” at the prospect of a George W. Bush administration.⁶¹

Can the divisions be healed? History provides a guide. This paper began by describing the roiling partisanship that characterized the presidential elections of 1796 and 1800. Yet, the 1800 result, while controversial, did produce a political revolution, as Thomas Jefferson later explained: “The Revolution of 1800 was as real a revolution in the principles of our government

⁵⁹ Fox News, poll, March 23-24, 2004.

⁶⁰ Voter Research and Surveys, exit poll, November 3, 1992.

⁶¹ Voter News Services, exit poll, November 7, 2000.

as that of 1776 was in its forms.”⁶² In this case, the revolution was the acceptance by the outgoing party of defeat and the peaceful assumption of the machinery of government by its rivals.

Thomas Jefferson did not gloat in his victory. Rather, in his Inaugural Address, Jefferson famously intoned, “We are all republicans; we are all federalists.”⁶³ Four years later, partisanship virtually disappeared. Jefferson enlightened the country with a grand vision of exploration (the Lewis and Clark expedition was the modern-day equivalent of traveling to Mars) and destiny (Jefferson’s unilateral decision to purchase the Louisiana Territory from the French). Like the infamous George Washington Plunkitt of Tammany Hall, Jefferson saw his opportunities and took ‘em. The result was the collapse of the Federalist Party. In 1804, the Federalists nominated a token candidate for the presidency who received only 14 electoral votes. By 1820, they disappeared altogether. Assessing Jefferson’s first term, John Randolph wrote: “Never was there an administration more brilliant than that of Mr. Jefferson up to this period. Taxes repealed; the public debt amply provided for. . . sinecures abolished; Louisiana acquired; public confidence unbounded.”⁶⁴ The so-called Era of Good Feelings began and it lasted through James Monroe’s election as president in 1820.

Since 1992 and the return of partisan politics, the country has been through tumultuous times. In 2004, voters seem inclined toward change. According to the latest Zogby poll, 49

⁶² Quoted in Reichley, *The Life of the Parties*, p. 64.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, p. 63.

⁶⁴ Quoted in Lorant, *The Presidency*, p. 62.

percent say the country is headed in the wrong direction; 44 percent say it is on the right track.⁶⁵

These are ominous numbers for any incumbent. To succeed, both George W. Bush and John Kerry have to offer themselves as candidates of change.

But it is not merely a change in policies that voters seek. Like the American public following the raucous elections of 1796 and 1800, voters also want a change of spirit. Whether Bush or Kerry can avoid another “Armageddon election” that contributes to the belief that victory by one or the other spells doom for the country remains to be seen. The early indications are that both candidates will mobilize their partisan bases to turn out votes. But in order to govern, it will be necessary for the winner to reach across the partisan divide. Otherwise, the new partisanship is here to stay for a while. Thus, the most intriguing question this year is not who will win. Rather, will the next president govern in the spirit of John Adams—whose presidency roiled the partisan waters—or Thomas Jefferson—who calmed them?

⁶⁵ Zogby International, survey, April 15-17, 2004.