

Moral Issues in the 2004 Presidential Election¹

D. Sunshine Hillygus
Department of Government
Harvard University
hillygus@fas.harvard.edu

DRAFT: PLEASE DO NOT CITE WITHOUT PERMISSION

The conventional wisdom about the 2004 presidential election is that the electorate voted on the basis of “moral values.” Journalists and pundits largely concluded that Bush won reelection because his stands on social issues, especially gay marriage and abortion, more closely coincided with those of most voters. The London Times reported that “Americans voted in record numbers for a Republican president primarily because they identified with his moral agenda.”² Former CNN Crossfire host, Tucker Carlson, concluded that “it is clear that it was not the war on terror, but the issue of what we’re calling moral values that drove President Bush and other Republicans to victory this week.” Tony Perkins, president of the Family Research Council, insisted that same-sex marriage was “the hood ornament on the family values wagon that carried the president to a second term.”³ There has been much less of a consensus among academics regarding the role of moral issues in the 2004 election. Several scholars have challenged the notion that voters were primarily concerned about moral issues (Hillygus and Shields 2005; Burden 2005), while others have argued that the anti-gay marriage ballot initiatives, in particular, contributed to Bush’s victory (Campbell and Quinn 2005).

In this paper, I argue that the election was not primarily a referendum on the issues of gay marriage and abortion. Rather, like most elections in the past, the economy and war were

¹ This paper is part of a larger project that is co-authored with Todd Shields.

² Harding, *The London Times*, November 5, 2004, page 8.

³ Cooperman and Edsall Nov. 8

foremost on the minds of most voters. And the influence of gay marriage and abortion had roughly the same effect as the issues of social security reform, the environment, education policy, and attitudes toward a minimum wage increase. The analysis also challenges the broader assumption that the American public is deeply divided by religiosity and partisanship—with Republicans increasingly devout and Democrats increasingly secular—arguing instead that religion creates policy fractures *within* the party coalitions. Although the analysis indicates that the 2004 presidential election was not fundamentally “about” moral issues, we must also recognize the increasing influence on electoral politics of issue publics, including those focused on policies about abortion or gay marriage.

Assessing the Moral Mandate

It is quite rare to find political scientists engaged in a public debate with journalists and pundits—our efforts are more commonly devoted to topics of academic, rather than popular, appeal.⁴ Yet understanding the role of gay marriage and abortion in the 2004 election is important for both theoretical and practical reasons. For political scientists, evaluating the role of moral issues in 2004 contributes to our understanding of voter decision making. Did moral issues trump the broader issues of the economy and war that academics have for so long believed account for electoral success? Ken Mehlman, Bush’s campaign manager, argued that past reelection campaigns were “how’re you going” elections, but “people now vote much more on

⁴ For example, Fiorina’s *Culture War?* and Bartels’, “What’s the matter with What’s the matter with Kansas?”

their values”⁵ If Mehlman is correct, we might need to update our election forecasting models and our theories of voter decision making.

For policy-makers, it is important to understand what an election is “about” in order to gauge the policy priorities of the electorate. Following the 2004 election, it appears that many political actors have acted on the perception that Bush won because of moral values. Christian conservatives have been quick to claim responsibility for Bush’s reelection, and now expect that a specific policy agenda will be pursued. Rev. D. James Kennedy, a broadcast evangelist, declared that “now that values voters have delivered for George Bush, he must deliver for voters. The defense of innocent unborn human life, the protection of marriage, and the nomination and confirmation of judges who will interpret the Constitution, not make law from the bench, must be first priorities come January.”⁶ Democrats have likewise behaved as if the median voter is a social conservative, and have fretted about how to bring the “values voters” back to the party. Senate Democrats selected a pro-life Senator, Harry Reid, as their minority leader. Senator Hillary Clinton recently told an audience that it would be “a great disservice to dismiss” the concerns of Americans who were driven to the polls because of their opposition to issues like gay marriage. Did the American electorate give Bush a “moral mandate” or did their vote represent support for other public policies? Elections are a blunt instrument for assessing the preferences of the public, but they are our most fundamental mechanism for democratic accountability. In an environment in which political elites are polarized across a number of different issues, it may be more difficult for elected officials to interpret the directives of the voters.

⁵ John Harris, “Victory Bears out Emphasis on Values; GOP tactics Aimed at Cultural Divide,” *Washington Post* November 2, 2004 A35.

⁶ Eichel, Nov. 7, 2004.

Bush and Kerry devoted most of their television advertising dollars to talking about the issues of the economy, Iraq, terrorism, health care, and social security (Kaid and Dimitrova 2005), yet the media concluded that moral values drove the election results on the basis of the results of a single exit poll question, the success of anti-gay marriage initiatives in 11 states, and the ongoing assumption about a cultural divide between “Red” and “Blue” America. The values voters conclusion hinged primarily on a finding from election day exit polls that showed that 22 percent of respondents selected "moral values" as their most important issue when voting for president. A number of scholars and journalists have pointed out various flaws in interpreting the poll question in this way (Fiorina 2005; Hillygus and Shields 2005), but the most basic is that we do know what is meant by “moral values.” The media have largely interpreted moral values as reflecting preferences on gay marriage and abortion. As one journalist wrote, “Now, we all have a sense of what is meant by moral values in this election: gay marriage, stem cell research, late-term abortion, prayer in school and several other similar issues. What it really refers to is being against gay marriage, stem cell research and late-term abortion.”⁷ Thus, the analysis here will evaluate the influence of these specific issues, rather than values specifically. Indeed, I would expect that underlying values and ideological philosophies have always shaped the issue preferences and priorities of voters, but such values are much broader than how moral values were interpreted in the 2004 election.

The exit poll question asked voters about the single issue that was most important in their vote, but we know that vote choice reflects a number of different considerations and concerns. To assess the effect of gay marriage and abortion on voter decision making in 2004, we must account for these other considerations and factors that can shape vote choice. In this paper, I

⁷ Dick Meyer, <http://www.cbsnews.com/stories/2004/11/05/opinion/meyer/main653931.shtml>

evaluate the influence of gay marriage and abortion relative to other issues using data from a unique post-election survey of 2,800 respondents.

The Blair Center 2004 Presidential Election Survey is nationally representative and randomly sampled from the Knowledge Networks (KN) Internet panel.⁸ The KN panel consists of a national random sample of households recruited by random-digit dialing (RDD), who either have been provided Internet access through their own computer or are given a WebTV console in exchange for completing 3 – 4 surveys per month. Thus, although surveys are conducted over the Internet, respondents are representative of the U.S. population.⁹ By using a probability sample for initial contact and by installing web access for respondents without it, KN overcomes the most common shortfall of other Internet surveys; the KN method eliminates non-Internet coverage bias and allows researchers to accurately gauge the potential for self-selection and non-response bias.¹⁰

Findings

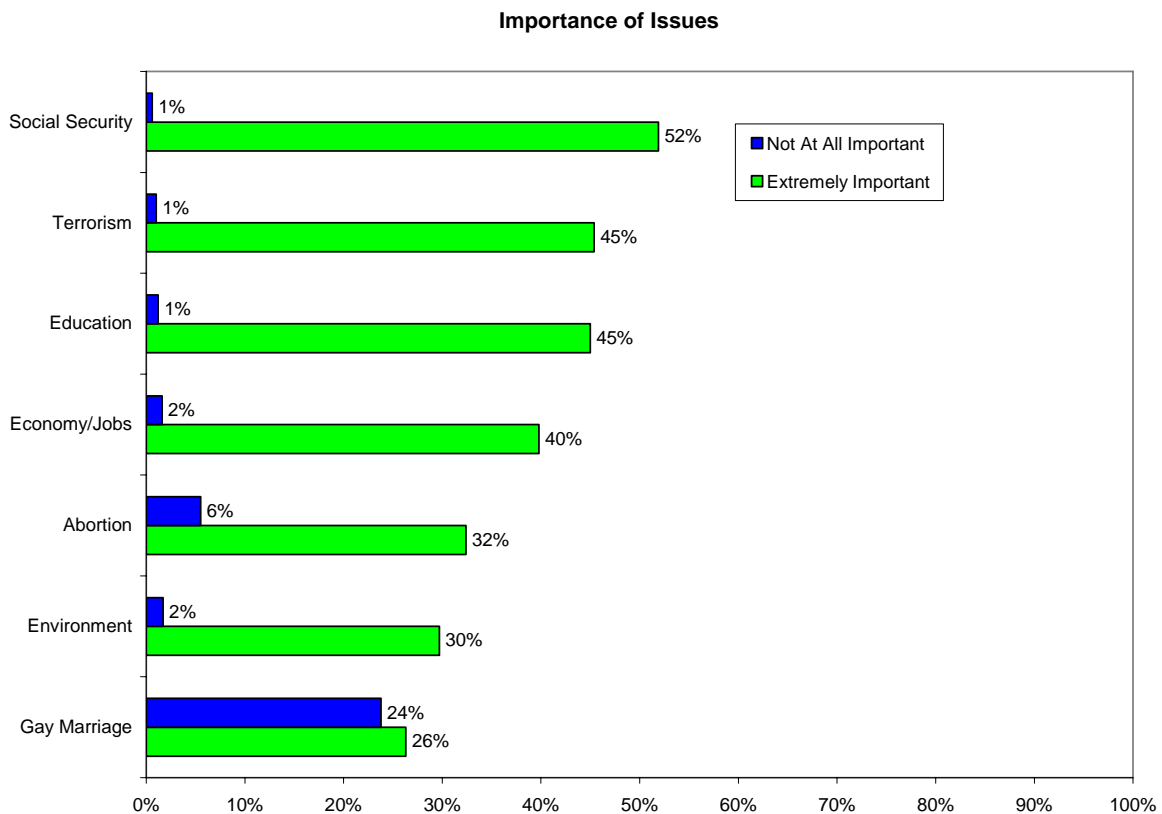
I begin by considering the importance voters placed on the specific issues of gay marriage and abortion relative to other political issues. Figure 1 reports responses to the question, “regardless of your position on the issue, please tell us how important the issue is to you personally.” Like other surveys, I find that a slim majority of respondents oppose gay marriage (54%), but I also find that few respondents consider this to be a pressing concern. On average, gay marriage and abortion are considered less important than a number of other issues. Only

⁸ Independent comparison studies have found the KN sample representative of U.S. Census averages (Krosnick and Chang 2001; Viscusi et al. 2004). Krosnick and Chang (2001) commissioned a set of side-by-side surveys using a single questionnaire regarding the 2000 U.S. election from national samples of American adults. They find the KN survey is comparable to the RDD telephone survey and representative of the U.S. population.

⁹ Detailed information on the KN methodology can be found on their web site at <http://www.knowledgenetworks.com/ganp/index.html>. Research using the KN panel has been published in a number of academic journals including *American Political Science Review*, *American Journal of Political Science*, and *Journal of Politics* to name a few (e.g., Lawless 2004; Hillygus and Jackman 2003).

¹⁰ For more elaborate comparison of probability versus volunteer Internet samples see Pineau and Slotwiner (2003).

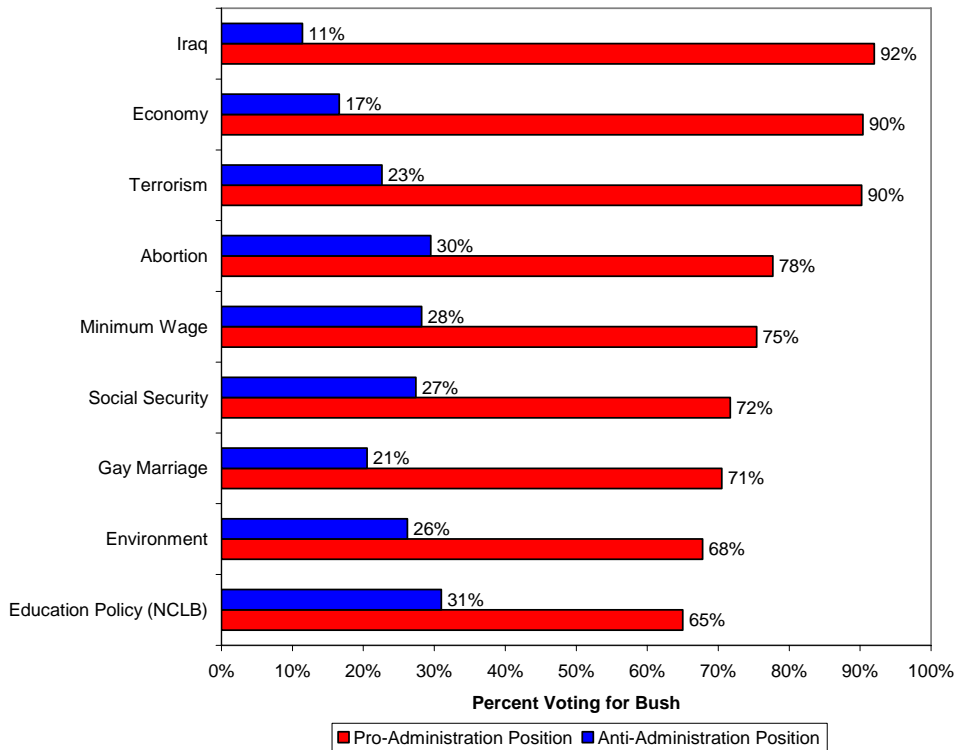
26% of respondents considered gay marriage “extremely important” and 24% (more than any other issue) considered it to be “not at all” important. In contrast, nearly half of the respondents indicated that social security, terrorism, and education policy were extremely important.



Next I consider the relationship between these issues and presidential vote choice. Which political issues were most strongly related to vote choice? If moral issues were the most important determinant of voter decision making, they should do a better job than other issues of predicting vote choice. In other words, individuals who agreed with Bush on gay marriage and abortion should always vote for Bush, while those who disagreed should always vote for Kerry.

In figure 2, I report the percentage of respondents voting for Bush (over Kerry) by issue position, with each position being coded as anti-administration or pro-administration (middle categories are not reported). Of the 9 different political issues, Iraq, terrorism, and the economy—rather than abortion and gay marriage—are more closely related to support for Bush. More than 90% of respondents who agreed with Bush on one of these issues ultimately voted for him on Election Day. Certainly, preferences on gay marriage and abortion are related to support for Bush, but the link is not as strong. The figure shows that 30% of pro-choice respondents voted for Bush and 29% of respondents opposed to gay marriage voted for Kerry. In contrast, just 11% of respondents opposed to the Iraq War voted for Bush and just 10% of those supportive of the Iraq War voted for Kerry. Clearly, gay marriage and abortion were not uniquely strong predictors of vote choice in 2004.

Bush Support by Positions on Policy Issues



Although the data presented in figure 2 provide an initial test of the importance of gay marriage in shaping vote choice, a more rigorous examination simultaneously controls for alternative explanations. To do this, I estimate a multivariate logit model predicting a vote for Bush (over Kerry), allowing us to compare the effects of the various issues while controlling for other factors that influence vote choice. For controls, I include standard demographic and political variables, including income, gender, race (black indicator variable), age, a union household identifier, church attendance, interpretation of the bible, party identification, and ideology.¹¹ I also estimate the model separately just for Independents, with the expectation that

¹¹ These findings are robust to other specifications of the model, including omitting the church attendance and bible measures, estimating gay marriage and abortion separately, etc.

without partisan loyalties, Independents might be the most open to selecting their vote choice on the basis of issue preferences.¹²

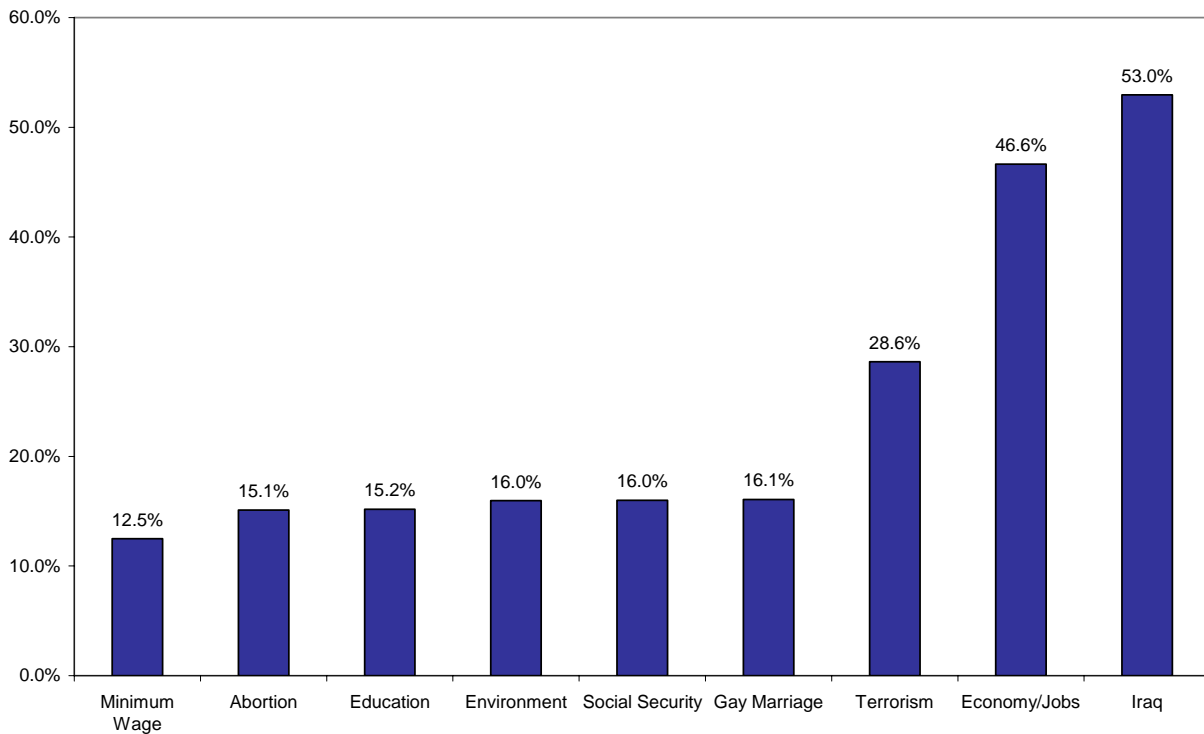
	All Voters		Independents	
	B	S.E.	B	S.E.
Party Identification	3.65	0.32 *		
Ideology	3.03	0.68 *	3.85	1.30 *
Iraq	2.45	0.27 *	2.97	0.48 *
Economic Evaluation	2.13	0.31 *	1.59	0.49 *
Abortion	0.62	0.31 *	0.75	0.50
Gay Marriage	0.65	0.27 *	-0.21	0.45
Terrorism Approach	1.22	0.31 *	1.91	0.49 *
Education Policy	0.62	0.27 *	0.50	0.45
Social Security	0.65	0.28 *	1.05	0.44 *
Minimum Wage	0.52	0.26 *	0.61	0.45
Environment	0.65	0.25 *	0.70	0.42
Female	0.03	0.23	-0.34	0.37
Black	-1.06	0.35 *	-1.19	0.59 *
Married	0.57	0.25 *	1.31	0.41 *
Income	0.66	0.57	0.43	0.95
Union Household	0.40	0.27	-0.03	0.44
Age	0.00	0.01	-0.01	0.01
Bible Interpretation	-0.45	0.21 *	-0.35	0.33
Church Attendance	-0.02	0.08	-0.02	0.13
Constant	-7.12	0.87	-5.46	1.40
PCP	92.5%		89.1%	
PRE	0.846		0.776	
N	1788		462	

The substantive effects of the political issues are illustrated in figure 3. The bar graph maps the change in predicted probability between an individual conservative on the specific issue question compared to an individual liberal on the issue, holding all other variables at their means. For example, the average pro-life voter was 15.1% points more likely to vote for Bush than the

¹² These respondents might also be somewhat less prone to selecting an issue position on the basis of party identification or candidate support.

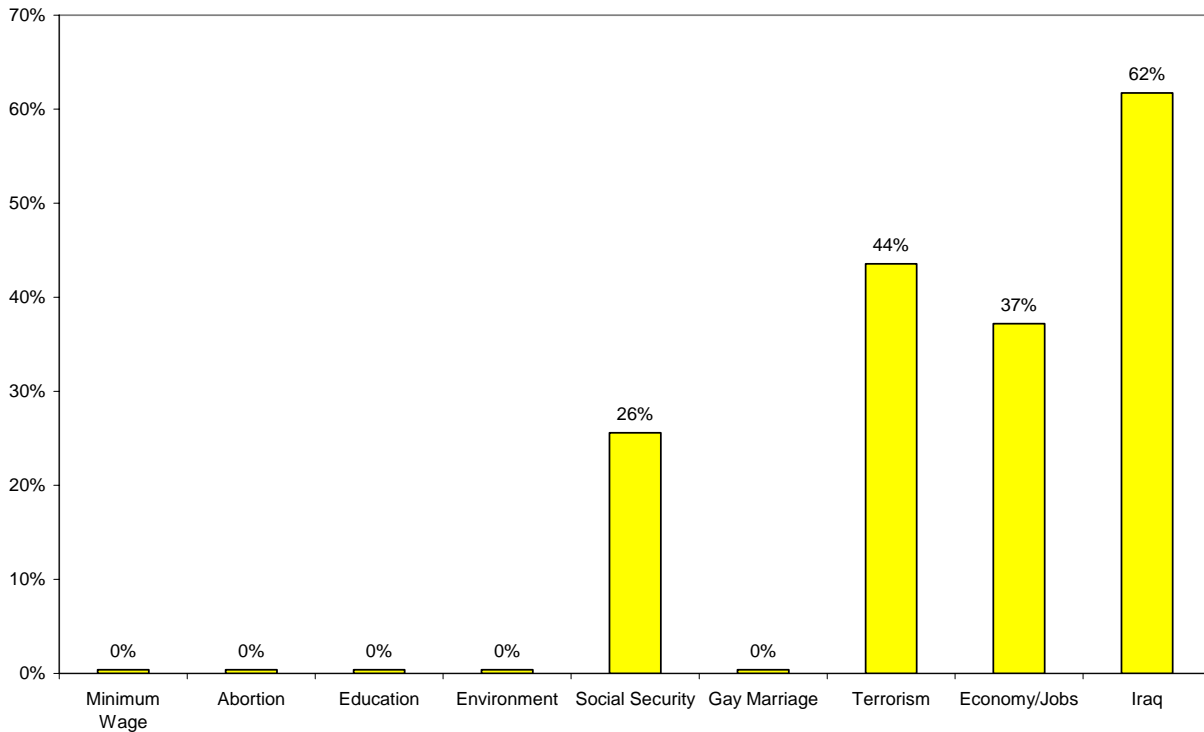
average pro-choice voter. In comparing the various issue effects, I find that Iraq, terrorism, and the economy swamp the effect of gay marriage and abortion. In fact, the effect of gay marriage and abortion are roughly equivalent to the effects of the issues of social security reform, the environment, minimum wage policy, and evaluations of No Child Left Behind education policy.

Change in Predicted Probability of Bush Vote



Among Independents, I find that gay marriage and abortion had no effect on vote choice once other issues and factors are taken into account (i.e., the coefficient was not statistically different from zero). At the same time, the effect of the Iraq war, terrorism, and the economy had an even larger effect among this subset of voters. Among Independents, the issue of social security was the only other issue that had a statistically significant effect on voter decision making.

Change in Predicted Probability of Supporting Bush Among Independents



Overall, then, gay marriage and abortion do not appear to be the most important issues of the 2004 presidential election. Rather, Iraq and terrorism and the economy had a much stronger impact on voter decision making. If we had to make a conclusion regarding the policy directives of the electorate, it appears to be much less of a moral mandate than general support for an incumbent president on the war and economy. Despite media conclusions otherwise, the finding that the war and economy were most strongly associated with presidential vote choice is perhaps not terribly surprising given that these issues accounted for most of the television advertising in the campaign and presidential debate coverage (Kaid and Dimitrova 2005).

Although gay marriage and abortion were not the primary predictors of vote choice, it would be hasty to conclude that they played no role in the 2004 election. Even if the majority of electorate did not vote on the basis of moral issues, it does not mean values voters could not have

been decisive in the final outcome (just as ferret owners could have been decisive¹³) given the closeness of the race. And there remains a lingering question about the so-called culture war. The media perception of a “moral mandate” resonated in large part because of a longer standing belief about the growing partisan and religious polarization in the country.

Although moral issues were not foremost on the minds of most voters, there is an apparent growing consensus that political elites in this country are more polarized on social issues than at anytime in recent history (Jacobson 2000, Abramowitz and Saunders 1998; Hetherington 2001; McCarty, Poole, Rosenthal 2005). Democrats and Republicans in Congress more consistently oppose each other on legislation (Jacobson 2000; McCarty, Poole, Rosenthal 2005), the party platforms are more ideologically extreme (Layman 1999), and party activists are more polarized across a variety of policy issues (Stone, Rapoport, and Abramowitz 1990; Layman and Carsey 1998). The Republican Party platform in 2004 asserts “the unborn child has a fundamental individual right to life which cannot be infringed,” while the Democratic Party platform proclaims, “because we believe in the privacy and equality of women, we stand proudly for a woman’s right to choose.” Is the general public also deeply divided along religious and partisan lines?

In a word, no. To be sure, there are differences in policy opinions between the devout and the non-devout, but the political divisions that many believe divide the country also create divisions *within* the political parties. In other words, many rank and file partisans in the electorate disagree with their affiliated political party on moral issues.¹⁴ Among Republicans (excluding leaners), 31% disagree with the party’s stance on abortion, 40% on stem cell research, 14% on gay marriage. Among rank and file Democrats, 14% disagree with the party’s stance on

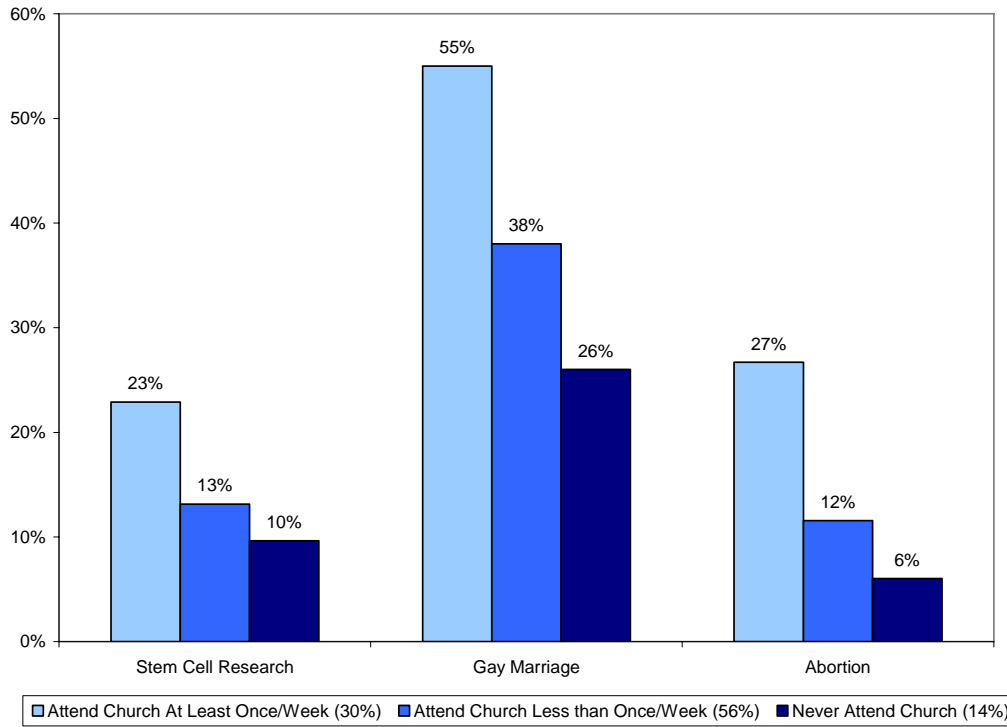
¹³ Fiorina, *Culture War?*, pg. 20-21.

¹⁴ The following numbers are calculated conservatively, with leaners excluded and moderate issue responses coded as congruent with the party.

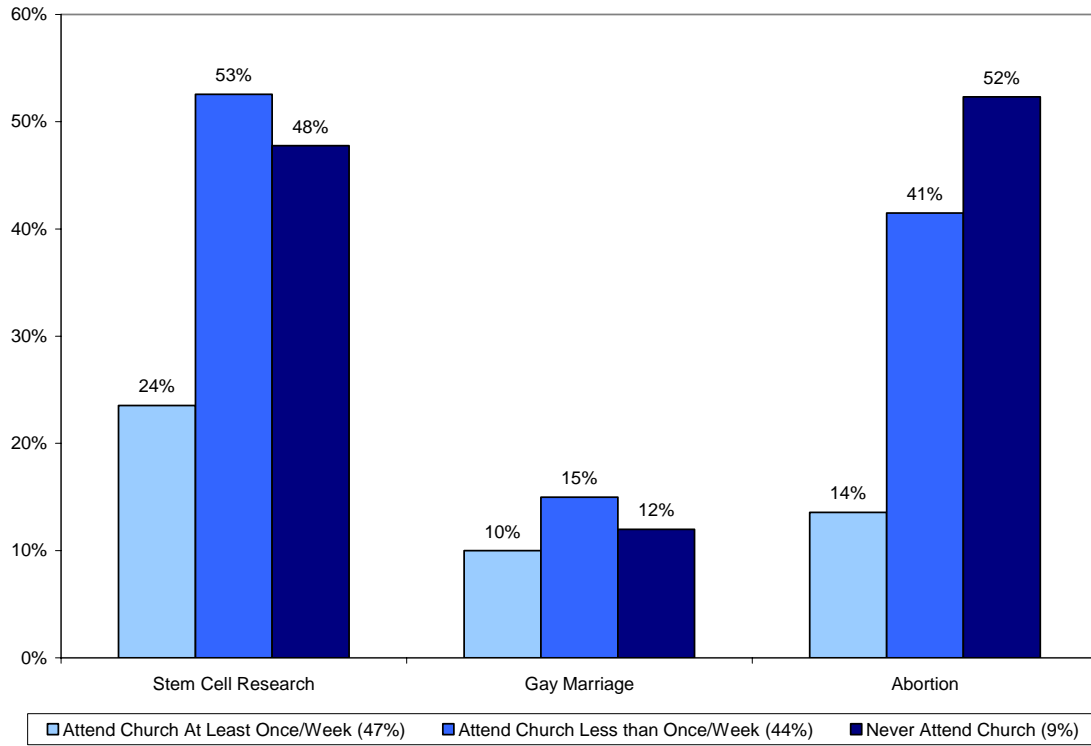
abortion, 15% on stem cell research, and 40% on gay marriage. In contrast to the conclusions of Thomas Frank, partisans are more likely to be congruent with their party's stance on economic issues than on social issues (Treier and Hillygus 2005). These party disagreements in large part reflect the religious diversity of the two political parties. Despite the conventional wisdom of a public divided into god-fearing, church-going Republicans versus godless, secular Democrats, the reality is hardly so stark. In fact, the religious composition of the political parties are not terribly different—slightly more Democrats (16%) than Republicans (7%) say that the Bible is written by men, and slightly more Republicans (44%) than Democrats (37%) say that the Bible is the literal word of God, but more partisans of both stripes believe that the Bible is the “inspired word of God.” Similarly, slightly more Democrats (14%) than Republicans (9%) report never attending church, while somewhat more Republicans (47%) than Democrats (30%) report attending church at least once per week, but this is not nearly the deep religious divide so often assumed.

As we show in the figures below, devoutly religious Democrats are more likely to disagree with the policy positions of the Democratic Party, while less religious Republicans are much more likely to disagree with the stated positions of the Republican Party. Of the Democrats who attend church at least once per week, a majority support a ban on gay marriage, 27% are opposed to abortion, and 23% of opposed to stem cell research. Among Republicans who attend church less than once per week, 53% are cross-pressured on stem cell research, 15% are cross-pressured on gay marriage, and 41% are cross-pressured on abortion. These cross-pressured individuals are more likely to feel that their affiliated party does not represent them well, and they are more likely to defect to the opposing party candidate on Election Day, even while maintaining their partisan identification (Hillygus and Shields 2005).

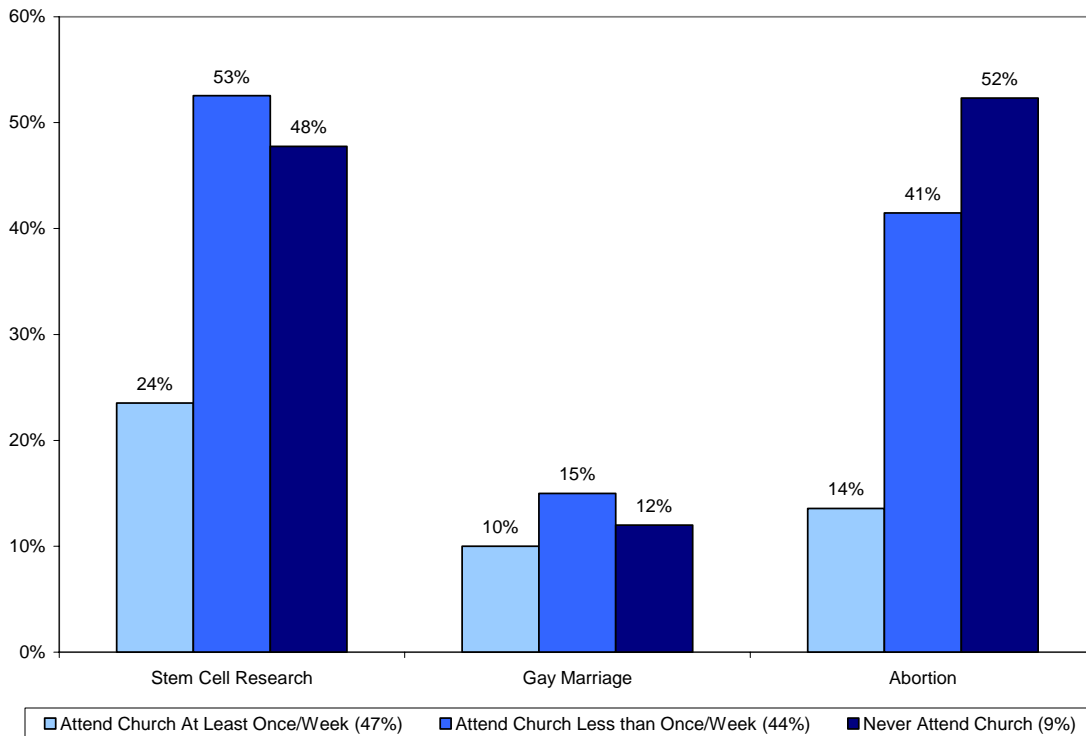
Moral Issue Cross-Pressures by Church Attendance Among Democrats



Moral Issue Cross-Pressures by Church Attendance Among Republicans



Moral Issue Cross-Pressures by Church Attendance Among Republicans



Thus, as much as religion might divide party activists or party leaders (although to see Bush dance around the topic of stem cell research and Kerry tip toe around the issue of gay marriage, suggests even this may be overstated), religion also creates divisions *within* party coalitions in the electorate. These fractures have long been apparent in the Democratic Party, and have recently shown themselves in the Republican Party as well. Charlie Cook, of the National Journal, writes, “The Senate fight over filibustering President Bush’s judicial nominations and, before that, the congressional intervention in the Terry Schiavo case expose a large and growing rift between the “sacred” and “secular” factions of the Republican Party”¹⁵

¹⁵ <http://www.govexec.com/dailyfed/0505/051005ol.htm>

This analysis suggests that partisans in the electorate are much less polarized than the political parties. What explains the disconnect between the policy pursuits of political elites and the preferences of the American public? Some have blamed the media (Fiorina 2005). Certainly, journalists are drawn to conflict and surprise, and are increasingly likely to define the “truth” as equivalent to balance—so that only extreme positions on both sides are covered. Other scholars blame party activists, who are thought to now have a bigger say in presidential primaries, campaign fundraising, and the media coverage. Both of these explanations are somewhat unsatisfying because they don’t take into account voters, who we would expect to ultimately shape the behavior of candidates. While the media and activists are no doubt contributing to the increasing polarization of political elites—across a wide spectrum of issues—we should not overlook the growing role of issue publics in electoral politics. Issue publics are a group of constituents, not strictly activists, who care about a particular issue. The mechanism by which issue publics influence the parties and candidates is fundamentally different from that of activists. Whereas activists proactively try to influence the political elites (and are themselves perhaps political elites), issue publics are simply voters. And candidates have polarized their campaign messages and strategies in recent years as they increasingly try to appeal to these issue constituencies.

Issue Public Mobilization Strategy

I am arguing (although not explicitly testing) that issue publics matter more today because new technologies have made it more efficient for campaigns to target issue publics rather than the median voter. It remains unknown as to whether the campaigns are actually successful in mobilizing these individuals (e.g., the 4 million lost evangelicals in 2000), and to

some extent it doesn't even matter. Issue public targeting is consequential because it shapes the specific policy promises candidates make and determines the candidate's perceived constituency. These campaign promises then become the policy priorities of elected officials (Han 2005).

It comes as no surprise that candidates and parties now have more information about the American public than ever before. This wealth of information has fundamentally changed the incentives and opportunities for voter mobilization, and thereby transformed campaign strategies and messages. With the availability of new computing power and statistical techniques, campaign organizations can use this information to precisely predict the attitudes and behavior of the public, most critically each citizen's likelihood of voting and likelihood of supporting a specific candidate. If the individual is in a strategically important area, the candidate can then micro-target messages on the basis of individualized issue priorities. At the same time, individuals who are not already politically active are ignored as are individuals who are unlikely to support the candidate. In other words, because of asymmetries in participation and preference intensity within the public, candidates have found that it is more efficient to target specific issue publics within their partisan constituency rather than the median voter. Winning candidates then pursue the policy interests of this campaign constituency rather than focusing on the broader policy preferences of the public or even electorate as a whole.

In the 1970s and 1980s, parties and candidates started collecting voter registration rolls and precinct voting history, allowing for some limited targeting of campaign canvassing (Rosenstone and Hansen 1993). Today, by contrast, candidates have created enormous databases in which voter registration data has been mapped to demographic data, credit card purchases, magazine subscriptions, and the like. As Milbank (1999, 23) explains, "If you're a registered voter, chances are the candidates know not just your name, address, and voting history but also

your age and the age of your children, whether you smoke cigars, where you shop, where you attend church, what kind of car you drive, how old it is, whether you're on a diet, and what type of pet you have”(Milbank 1999, 23). Most critically, the information is no longer simply demographic, it is also psychographic—i.e., information about the voter’s preferences and beliefs.

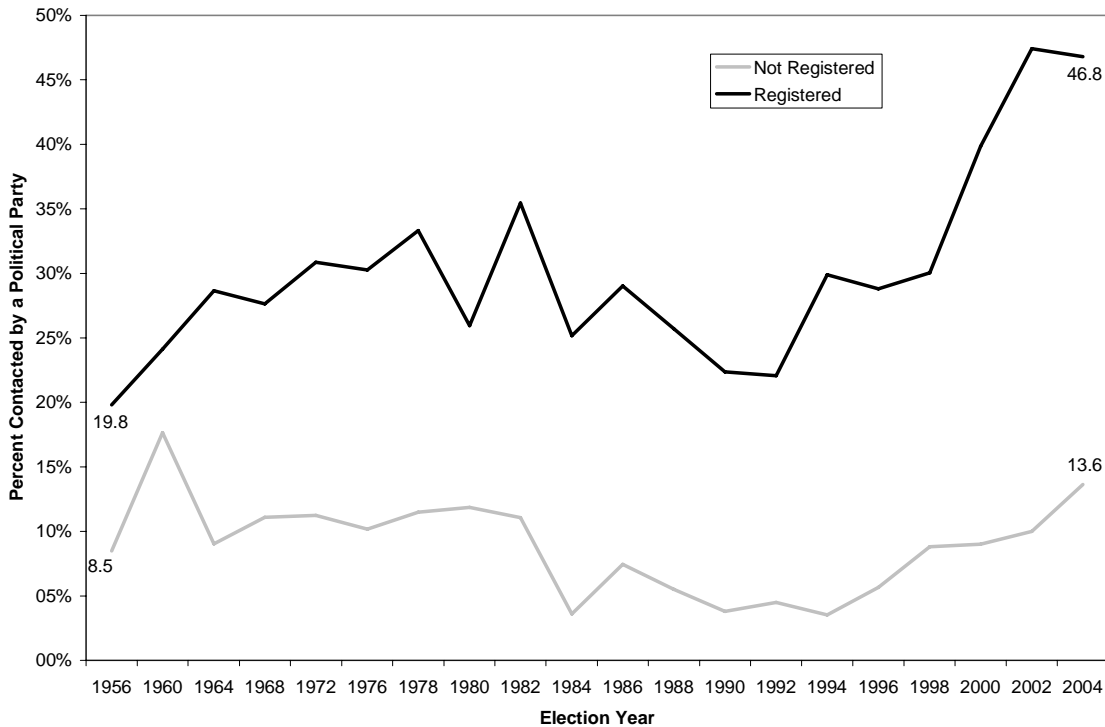
With this information the candidates can efficiently target mobilization efforts and messages. With great precision, the candidates are able to predict the probability that an individual is going to vote, the probability that she is going to vote for a particular candidate, and her issue priorities. As one political consultant explained, "You don't have to shotgun anymore. You can now bullet" (Milbank 1999, 23). Thus, a letter or email highlighting a candidate’s sporting policy will be sent to the registered Independent who owns a gun, while a message focused on gay marriage will be sent to the registered Republican who is a member of an evangelical church but has voted sporadically in recent elections. This fundamental strategy change was explained by one campaign consultant in the following way, “I think politics has always been driven by data; it’s just that the data on the electorate was never very accurate. The reason traditional politics has been about class or race politics is because individual policy preferences could only be meaningfully categorized by class or race. Now I can differentiate between nine gradations of nose-pickers, and political culture produced over new media is going to have the same nuances . . . or is it fragments?”(Howard 2003, 229).

Whereas the introduction of previous technology, especially radio and television, were once used to expand the message to a broader audience, technologies today are used to narrow the message to specific issue publics. In other words, the changing campaigning technologies have created incentives for candidates to make explicitly ideological and issue-based appeals to

narrower portions of the public while ignoring those individuals with little chance of voting for them (either because they will support other candidate or are unlikely to vote at all). As one consultant explained, “In previous campaigns Republicans would call potential voters with a tape-recorded message from Ronald Reagan or a similar personage on the generic importance of voting. In 2004 a voter concerned about abortion would hear “if you don’t come out and vote, the number of abortions next year is going to go up.” The narrowcasting of campaign messages—individualized and increasingly issue-based—have shaped the policies pursued by winning candidates.

As rather crude evidence of this trend, we observe this increased targeting of voters in the National Election Study surveys. The difference in self-reported party contact has increased dramatically in recent decades as parties have been able to more precisely target those individuals likely to turnout. Although the rate of party contact among those respondents not registered to vote has not changed much, there has been a dramatic increase in the rate of party contact among those registered to vote, starting in the mid-1990s when computerized registration rolls became available.

Party Contact by Voter Registration



To return to the original question about the role of gay marriage and abortion in the 2004 presidential election: the 2004 election was not a “moral mandate”—the average American appeared to be voting on the basis of economic considerations, war and terrorism. At the same time, we should not dismiss the role of gay marriage and abortion in 2004. Even as the broader campaign was being waged primarily on issues of economy and war, millions of Christian conservatives were being told that the election was about moral values. The Republican National Committee, for instance, mailed voters in Arkansas and West Virginia flyers that have the word "allowed" over a picture of a same sex couple and "banned" over an image of the Bible. Today, these same Christian conservatives are pressing Bush to pursue their policy agenda

because he emphasized to them—in direct mail, email messages, telephone, and door to door canvassing—that moral issues were at stake in the election. At the same time, the Bush campaign was also targeting elderly investors, military families, and small business owners, and so on---White House Political Director, Sara Taylor, reported that they had 30 different target groups---and these groups were told that their pet issue was a priority to the candidate. As consequence of this campaign strategy, it becomes difficult to assess what an election is “about” and to follow the directives of the general public. And it remains to be seen how these issue constituencies place constraints on the potential policy alternatives and future electoral success.