
3c. Nothing Happened in 2004

(Ronald KING)

Despite all the intensity, all the negative campaigns, all the media hype, all the fear and or hopes, this was a very conventional election. Just about 90% of self-identified Republicans voted Republican for President. Just a fraction lower of the self-identified Democrats voted Democratic. Independents split almost 50-50, leaning just a bit toward Kerry.

Republicans turned out a bit more than Democrats, which is expected. The result is a narrow popular margin. But this translates into a solid structural advantage. Here's why: There is a theory of US politics, which posits long period of one-party dominance, based on structural organization by voting rules, plus broad party allegiances. Thus the 1890-1930 period was mostly Republican, the 1930-1970 period was mostly Democratic. There was a brief period of divided party rule, but we are now firmly in a structurally Republican era. Democrats can win, but only when they successfully swim upstream.

Why? Let's first look at the House of Representatives. With population shifts, there are fewer Rustbelt (Michigan, Minnesota, Wisconsin and other Midwest states) seats relative to Sunbelt (Florida, Arizona, New Mexico, among others). State legislatures draw districts to favor incumbents, and virtually all incumbents win reelection. For the Senate, with two seats per state, many small states are overrepresented. Senate elections are largely personality contests, and the Democrats have a better chance to capture the Senate than the House, but it is hard to do, as only one-third Senators are elected every two year years. As for the Presidential election, the solid South was key to the Democratic structural advantage in the 1930-70 era. It is key to Republican structural advantage in the new era. For a Democrat to win, he or she must capture *almost everything* up the Northeast, across the Midwest, and down the west coast.

Elections are either sustaining, deviating, or realigning. Without hope of realigning, the Democrats can win only with deviating elections – when the Republicans divide, or when people reject temporarily the Republican incumbent. This is retrospective voting theory, i.e., when the economy is far down, when there is major scandal, when people believe the president is failing to do his job, then enough defections occur to have a presidential deviation from the main pattern. But it should not be long lasting (i.e., Eisenhower v. Dem dominance, Wilson v. Republican dominance).

Think about this election -- a weak economy, an illegitimate war where we are failing to win the peace, lack of international respect, no domestic agenda, a president who lost the debates -- and still it was not enough (barely) to produce a deflection. It will take even more 'retrospective distress' to get the Democrats over the top.

Bush did use patriotic emotional appeals based on the fears created after 9/11, plus he had fundamentalism, a slowly recovering economy (better than not recovering), and vicious attacks on Kerry's competence. We should expect this from incumbent Republicans. There is no surprise here. And this was enough for his victory, given all the structural advantages that go his way.

The result is pessimistic, far more than Lei Guang implies in his essay, about any Democratic future, in the medium run, other than temporary deviations from Republicanism, which still would usually be accompanied by a Republican Congress. Progressives, hopefully, should finally abandon the myth of John Kennedy and the glorious presidency, and develop new tactics.

Note, this is different than the Red-and-Blue analysis of America in one of its main versions. The population is not ideologically more divided over issues. Elites are more divided. But the mainstream sees more agreement over issues than ordinarily. It is not ideological division that makes for Red-Blue. Instead, it is ordinary, routine, normal party identification. It is the main thing that explains voting -- retrospective judgments about the success of the incumbent aside -- and it did in this election. In this election, the retrospective negative (given campaign spins and population fears) was not enough to defeat Bush.

Thus, little happened in the 2004 election. I did not expect anything to happen.

(This essay is in part a reaction to Lei Guang's essays. The author specializes in American politics and is the Chair of the Department of Political Science at San Diego State University.)