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## **“MORAL VALUES” VOTERS IN THE 2004 PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION**

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## Introduction

Political scientists long have known that the causal link between issue positions and the vote can be indirect and tenuous. The electoral decision has two components: turnout and direction – whether to vote or not and for whom to vote. Explanations of these include long term factors – notably psychological attachment to a political party (or party identification) and the images that voters attach to a party (party image) – and short term factors – feelings toward the candidates and positions on the issues.

Typically, party identification serves as a cue for evaluating the candidates and the issues. And, typically, voters find it easier to make judgments about the candidates’ personalities and characters than to form opinions on abstract issues.

This serves as background for understanding the role of “moral issues” in the 2004 presidential campaign. Certainly, the Republican Party long has had the image of being the party of family values and of traditional morality. The rational strategy for a political party is to reinforce the loyalty of its base by emphasizing core aspects of the party’s image early in the campaign. This enables its core voters to perceive the year’s issues by using the party’s preferred frame of reference. In other words, issues often are not evaluated *de novo* and the parties and candidates are not evaluated in terms of their positions on the issues. Rather, voters often use parties as cues for evaluating candidates and then use both their preferred party and preferred candidate as a way to determine positions on the issues. What we hear from the voters often is an echo of what the voters hear from their preferred parties and candidates. The voter often learns that the issues emphasized by their preferred party and candidates are the important issues.

Data from the 2004 National Election Poll strongly suggest that this was the pattern for Republican voters in 2004. Voters were likely to say that “moral issues” were important in determining their choice for president because they were predisposed to vote Republican and because the Republican campaign effectively communicated the message that “moral issues” were more important than other issues.

Voters who said that “moral issues” were most important in determining their vote for President were disproportionately likely to think of themselves as Republicans: 59% of this cohort identified as Republican compared to only 38% of the electorate at large.

“Moral issues” voters were quintessential members of the Republican base, not new converts.

## Analysis

Voters who said that “moral issues” were most important in determining their vote for President were disproportionately likely to think of themselves as Republicans: 59% of this cohort identified as Republican compared to only 38% in the electorate at large. Further, they were not new voters. While 11% of all voters said that it was the first time they ever had voted, only 9% of “moral issues” voters were voting for the first time. While this difference may not be a huge one, it makes it clear that “moral issues” voters were not disproportionately likely to be first time voters and that they were not likely to be new converts to the Bush cause. Perhaps most significantly, they were early deciders. Among “moral issues” voters, 84% decided how to vote



more than a month before Election Day, compared to 78% of all voters. “Moral issues” voters were quintessential members of the Republican base, not new converts. (In contrast, 20% of voters who said that education was the most important issue were new voters.)

To understand how saying “moral issues” was the most important issue in the presidential vote may have been a consequence of other partisan loyalties, we should look at it as a dependent variable in relation to other items asked of the voters on Tuesday.

First, we look at general approval of the Bush presidency. Overall, 22% of all voters said that moral issues were the most important factor in their decision. Voters who approved of the way George W. Bush was handling his presidency were 50% more likely (33%) to cite “moral values” while only 10% of those who did not approve of Bush’ presidency cited them.

31% of voters who said their family’s financial situation was better today than four years ago said that moral values were most important compared to only 12% of those who said it was worse.

While we would not expect a direct link between financial well-being and believing that moral values were the most important issue in a Presidential election, we find that 31% of voters who said their family’s financial situation was better today than four years ago said that moral values were most important, compared to only 12% of those who said their financial situation was worse than four years ago. Similarly, 31% of those who approved of our decision to go to war in Iraq cited moral issues (while only 8% cited Iraq) and only 12% of those who disapproved of the decision to go to war cited them (and 22% mentioned Iraq).

While one might conceive of the decision to go to war in Iraq as a moral issue, evaluation of how things are going for the U.S. now in Iraq is an empirical issue. Among those who think the war is going “very well,” 35% say that moral values were the most important factor (and only 8% said “Iraq” was the determining factor in their choice for president). Among those who say the war is going “somewhat well,” the percent who voted for president based on “moral values” drops to 32%, while only 18% of those who think the war is going “somewhat badly” and 10% of those who say it is going “very badly” cite moral values. (Thinking that moral values is most important among those who say the war is going somewhat/very well is at 33%, while among those who say the war is going somewhat/very badly, only 13 % cite moral issues as being most important.) The important point here is that there should be no logical direct relation between the empirical evaluation of the course of a war and the belief that moral issues are the most important one in a presidential election. Finding that there is a relationship between these items leads us to believe that support for the Bush administration and its policies leads people to say that moral values are the most important issue in the presidential election.

The use of this issue was more likely to reinforce pre-existing preferences among the Republican base and to activate others who already leaned toward the Republican Party than it was to convert Democrats



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On another empirical matter, “are we safer from terrorism today than we were four years ago?” 30% of those who think we are safer cited “moral values” and only 12 % of those who think us to be less safe did.

Among self-identified Democrats, only 10% cited “moral values” as the basis of their choice for president, while 35% of self-identified Republicans did.

### **Conclusion**

These data lead us to conclude that it is likely that core Republican Party loyalists learned President Bush’s message in the campaign and, when asked to rationalize their vote in terms of position on an issue, they cited an issue that President Bush emphasized in his campaign. Rather than choosing candidates on the basis of issues, voters often learn what to think about the issues from the candidates and parties they already prefer. These data indicate that saying that “moral values” was the most important issue often was a consequence of holding pro-Republican positions on the war and on the economy and of general approval of the Bush Presidency.

The Republican campaign energized and mobilized its core constituency by emphasizing “moral values” in their campaign. These data indicate that the use of this issue was more likely to reinforce pre-existing preferences among the Republican base and to activate others who already leaned toward the Republican Party than it was to convert Democrats.

*Data from 2004 National Election Poll*