

# FINANCIAL REVIEW

## **Democrats reflect on their own values**

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Bruce Reed, president of the centrist Democratic Leadership Council and a former domestic policy adviser to Bill Clinton, could hardly have put his party's predicament more starkly.

"We ran a good campaign against a bad president, and we still got beat," he observed a few days after the election.

Since November 2, extraordinary acreage of newsprint has been expended on analysing why one of the most consequential elections in American history ended up the way it did.

Much of this analysis has become bogged down in argument over whether values issues trumped other concerns, such as the war in Iraq and terrorism.

Some commentators suggested that it was 9/11 alone that kept the White House in Republican hands. This rather missed the point that it was a combination of values issues plus a perception that Bush was more likely to be steadfast in defence of the realm, which you could argue is a values issue in and of itself.

The point is there was no single issue or sub-set of issues, but among the range of impulses driving people's votes, values, in the broad sense, were certainly critical.

Not only do the polls support this perception, but anecdotal evidence provides reinforcement.

Some conservative commentators have contended that by asserting that moral values issues were paramount, people were somehow insulting middle Americans, who were being portrayed as religious zealots incapable of original thought.

In other words, millions of evangelicals followed some sort of inner siren song to vote for Bush because their faith demanded it, or because preachers simply urged people to "vote the Bible".

While there is no doubt that a significant number of voters were motivated this way, there was also a substantial number of social conservatives who simply believed that on the broader values issue, the Republican leadership was more in tune with mainstream America.

In spite of efforts by some commentators to play down the importance of religion in this election because reference to a hidden hand would somehow detract from

the purity of the Bush victory, prominent right-wing family values activist Paul Weyrich had no doubt whose side God was on.

"God may not be a Republican but he heard the fervent prayers of millions of values voters to keep his hand on America one more time, despite our national sins of denying the right to life, despite ignoring the biblical injunction against acts which are 'an abomination unto the Lord' and despite the blatant attempt to remove God from the public square," Weyrich, chairman of the Free Congress Foundation, wrote.

"God gave this president and this president's party one more chance."

Republican campaigners skilfully employed wedge politics to reinforce a feeling that the Republican Party was more in tune with mainstream America by aligning the party and its candidate solidly with measures to ban gay marriage, advance a pro-life agenda, limit federal funding for stem-cell research and espouse, more broadly, a family values agenda.

John Howard's pollster, Mark Textor, understands the benefits of alignment, and so it proved to be the case in the recent Australian poll.

Whatever judgements might be recorded about his abilities, or lack of them, Bush approximates an American everyman. In this television age, that is important. It wouldn't be surprising to encounter Bush at the local Home Depot, but John Kerry would seem out of place in such surroundings.

Now, it might be observed that competence, a certain ability to process complex information, not to mention prudence of thought and action, should count for something, but in the midst of a war, however ill-conceived, it was always going to be difficult to get rid of an incumbent.

Kerry, who ran a dogged campaign in which he clearly won the debates and pushed Bush close in the electoral college, has been spared undue criticism: his gracious concession speech was one of the high points of the campaign and prompted the question of why he proved incapable of rising to such heights earlier.

The fact is that, like Howard in Australia, who has been made to look better than he is because he has faced a Labor Party on a downward incline, Bush was blessed with a Democratic candidate and party that had become decoupled from the mainstream.

In these circumstances it was something of a miracle that Kerry got as close as he did, polling more votes than any other losing (or winning) candidate in history, apart from Bush this time, and falling short by just 34 electoral college votes.

But as Reed makes clear, this result aided, no doubt, by a large vote against Bush and not necessarily for Kerry barely disguises a dire situation for the Democrats.

"For the first time in memory, Republicans are now the majority party from the top of the ballot to the bottom," he wrote.

"The south, which helped elect every Democratic president in history, hasn't given us a single electoral vote in the 21st century.

"Bush won majorities not just of white men and evangelicals, but of white women, married people, couples with children, people over 30, voters who make above \$US50,000 (\$65,800), high school and college graduates, and regular churchgoers.

"The No. 1 issue on voters' minds was something that we don't discuss in polite company in the blue [Democrat] states: moral values," Reed wrote.

"The heartland that great bastion of fiscal conservatism at home and restraint abroad had good reasons to doubt Bush's values, but doubted ours instead.

"Moral values aren't simply the social issues Republicans cynically exploited, such as same-sex marriage and abortion.

"At a time when some in the world are out to destroy our way of life, many Americans are more concerned than ever about the bedrock values that built it patriotism, personal responsibility, opportunity, a clear sense of right and wrong.

"Most voters in red [Republican] states think we look down on them for worrying about the moral direction of the country.

"They have no idea that we might be concerned about it, too."

Reed's analysis from the Democratic Party's beleaguered centre is correct.

The question is whether enough of his colleagues, infected by a visceral loathing for Bush and all his works, will listen.