

## The Mutable Mandate: Crafting the Constructed Message, Meaning, and Strategic Subjectivity in the Post-Election Campaign for 2004

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**Abstract.** *Taking it as axiomatic that, in the current historical context, aggregate results from American national elections rarely if ever “speak for themselves,” this research employs Q methodology to examine the subjective meanings toward the outcome of the 2004 presidential contest as these were formed and forged over the course of what we have termed “the post-election campaign” (Thomas & Baas, 1996). Based on recent historical experience and a handful of scholarly investigations, we argue that these ex post facto subjective accounts deserve to be regarded as not only alternative “political constructions,” but pending their narrative appeal as mythic mandates—“stories we tell ourselves about ourselves” (Levi-Strauss, 1978)—crucial manifestations of “politically strategic subjectivity” with profound implications as states of mind with the power to affect the course of action undertaken by like-minded leaders controlling the policymaking levers of the state. In this instance, two studies are reported: one undertaken at or near Bush’s second inauguration; the other conducted six months into his second term. What we find is consistent with Hershey’s (1992) proposition that the course of arriving at “conventional wisdom” on the meaning of a given electoral outcome, particularly the nature of the mandate it warrants, follows a “winnowing” pattern whereby an initial pool of plausible yet diverse constructions of the meaning of the vote undergoes simplification and consolidation over time, crystallizing eventually into a narrative—or small number of complementary stories—that gains acceptance as “conventional wisdom.” While our findings to a degree corroborate this claim, they fall short of a full-fledged confirmation. In light of electoral realities since, especially Democratic success in capturing both houses of*

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*Congress in the 2006 Midterms, there remains substantial contention over what can be concluded from the 2004 vote. Accordingly, we devote a Discussion to possible reasons for this, and what it may signify regarding current patterns of political debate and meaning-making in a politically polarized setting quite averse to detached, bipartisan compromise or consensus-building.*

### **The Myth of Manifest Mandates**

In sharp contrast to practitioners of political journalism, political science has a long tradition of skepticism in the face of claims advanced by winning candidates in presidential elections that an electoral victory contains manifest meaning as a *popular mandate*. Mythical or not, electoral mandates are matters of critical, strategic importance in signaling (allegedly) to pertinent political actors, principally members of Congress, that the voting public prefers one course of policy action over another. Hence the enduring myth of manifest mandates in American presidential politics rests on the proposition that this preference is readily decipherable from the election returns, which are treated in the aggregate as conveying the majority's collective endorsement of the president-elect's stance on key issue-positions put forward during the campaign (Conley, 2005).

The discrepancies between political-scientific and mass-consumption journalistic accounts of these matters are dramatically displayed in the case of the 1980 presidential election. In the immediate aftermath of Reagan's victory—due in large part to an unanticipated and very late movement of undecided voters in favor of the winner—pundits and partisans quickly crafted an appealing “shift to the right” narrative for the outcome. And this view held sway in the critical first year of the Reagan Presidency—in which Reagan's so-called “supply-side economics” was enacted by a Congress convinced by the claims of a mandate—until the findings of political science, drawn primarily from Michigan's American National Election Studies survey of voters, began to appear with an altogether different story of what voters were actually thinking with respect to policy issues. By then, of course, “the Reagan Revolution” was largely a *fait accompli*, having been built into the fiscal foundation of the federal budget for the remainder of the decade. Among the many lessons of 1980 and its aftermath is the notion that politicians and students of politics alike neglect the “post-election campaign”—wherein participants and observers of an election outcome enter into a critical contest over deciphering the meaning inherent in the decisions made by millions of individual voters—at their own peril. Acting on this insight, Hershey (1992) fashioned the product of this debate “the constructed result” and content-analyzed newspaper accounts of the 1984 election, from which she discovered that these accounts undergo a

“winnowing process, eventually distilling into a journalistic version of conventional wisdom. Interestingly, the favored story from the political press in 1984 was that Reagan’s landslide had more to do with “difficulties among the Democrats” than with incumbent Ronald Reagan’s record or message. Again, political science came to see things differently, treating the 1984 result as essentially a “positive retrospective” vote attributable in large part to widespread satisfaction with the upbeat performance of the macro-economy in the year preceding the election (Abramson, Aldrich & Rohde, 1986). Against this backdrop, Thomas and Baas (1996) employed Q methodology in an investigation of retrospectives on the 1992 election with a P set composed of roughly equal numbers of political scientists, campaign professionals, pundits, and ordinary citizens. Among their discoveries was clear evidence of the Clinton Administration’s failure in waging the post-election campaign: the preferred “Triumph of a New Democrat” account of Clinton’s victory was revealed as a factor defined by a single Q sort, namely that provided by a senior official from the White House Communications Office.

In this research, we seek to extend this line of inquiry by examining accounts of George W. Bush’s victory in the 2004 election. As before, a Q sample of subjective interpretations of the 2004 outcome was fashioned from the scores of accounts that appeared in the weeks between the election and the Inauguration on January 20, 2005. In this case, however, the research was designed so as to “test” Hershey’s winnowing hypothesis. Accordingly, Q sorts were collected in two waves: one shortly after the President’s inauguration, during the so-called “honeymoon” period; the other, six months into Bush’s second term. Altogether, then, our results not only permit us to calibrate the elusive notion of “The Bush Mandate” (or lack thereof) as revealed in the first-wave factor structure, but to consider the effects of political time—much of which, according to polling data, has not been kind to the Bush policy agenda—on understandings (and also “memories”) of the critical strategic and inherently subjective notion of what the 2004 election outcome can be taken to signify politically.

### **Setting, Concourse, and Q sample**

In the 2000 presidential election, voting and vote-counting irregularities in the state of Florida produced a virtually surrealistic state of affairs with both candidates essentially claiming victory and Americans generally consigned to an unhappy-camper role as viewers of a lengthy spectacle of litigious contention—waged on television (as county-level election officials haggled over “hanging chads” on disputed ballots) and in Florida’s and federal courts—where ultimately, the Supreme Court settled the matter in a split-decision in Mr. Bush’s favor. Four years later,

the turbulent status quo had hardly subsided: indeed it had been profoundly shaken by the events of September 11, 2001, when four American airliners were hijacked by Al Qaeda jihadists who succeeded in their mission of evil by leveling both towers of the World Trade Center while falling short on the presumed goal of destroying the architectural centers of U.S. government in Washington, D.C.: the Capitol Building and the White House. The political effects were traumatic and persistent: the public rallied behind its Commander-in-Chief and, for a time, international sympathies for the American victims tracked our nation's trajectory of national unity and patriotic resurgence.

For the body politic, 9/11 and its aftermath transformed the Bush Presidency: first, by the public's dramatic change in attitude toward the incumbent himself—approval ratings literally skyrocketed after having fallen to perilously low and partisan-driven levels prior to the attacks. Second, Bush's response policy-wise was nothing less than a complete reversal of his campaign promise to pursue a "humble" foreign policy while resisting temptations to squander American resources and personnel in so-called "nation-building" efforts. In the end, of course, the President pursued a foreign policy course that was anything but humble, dispatching American troops first to Afghanistan for purposes of "regime change" by eradicating the Taliban government which had provided a safe-haven for Al Qaeda leaders and their minions to plot and prepare for terrorist assaults on the United States. Second, and less-clear-cut in its connection to 9/11 and to terrorist threats to the United States, Iraq was singled out as the principal threat in an "axis of evil" that essentially dictated U.S. prosecution of a pre-emptive war aimed at regime change in that country as the site of an indefinite global War on Terror. The once-supportive climate of public opinion, both at home and internationally, fractured dramatically and rather quickly in response to the American intervention in Iraq. Meanwhile, the effects of Bush tax cuts coupled with a loss of confidence in economic institutions in the wake of the Enron scandal—effects that were aggravated by the decision to finance the war with borrowed money—produced a profound fiscal crisis at home that, linked with other factors, deepened the economic downturn, accelerated the pace of job loss, and augmented even further the yawning and growing gap between haves and have-nots in the United States.

Against this backdrop of lingering trauma and unrelenting turmoil over the wisdom of the President's policy response, the 2004 election cycle began amidst a context of contention and acrimony that in many ways made 2000 and its aftermath look like child's play. Once Democratic Primary voters made it clear that Massachusetts Senator John Kerry's nomination as the party's standard bearer seemed to offer the greatest chance of defeating Bush—a view reflected early on in exit-

polls from the primary races—the Bush campaign took the fight to the challenger, defining him as a “flip-flopper” on key issues, while suggesting that Americans would be less safe with a Democrat in the White House. Kerry, for his part, ran a curiously cautious campaign, as if trying to avoid defeat. The outcome in the electoral college was only marginally different from four years earlier: Bush picked up three blue states from the race with Gore (New Hampshire, Iowa and New Mexico), while winning the overall popular vote by a 51% to 48% margin. If, as Pomper (2005) has suggested, the question in 2000 was, “Did George Bush Win?” the question in 2004 had become, “Why did George Bush Win?”

In the month following the election, editorials and news analyses—from print and broadcast sources—proffered a plethora of responses to the latter question. Drawing upon the hundreds of such statements we were able to amass from the post-election concourse, we eschewed the use of a formal statement-sampling schema and sought in our final Q sample to ensure a rough balance between commentaries sympathetic to and critical of Bush’s claim on the day after the election that his victory signaled real “political capital,” which he intended to spend in the pursuit of an ambitious agenda in his second term. At the same time, we were careful to ensure that statements reflecting the results from our study of the 1992 election, which identified “four versions of the Clinton victory” were included in the final N=35 Q sample as well. P sets for our two studies differed from the 1992 investigation, which took great pains to ensure roughly equal numbers of journalists, political scientists, political-campaign workers/consultants, and ordinary citizens. In Study 1 our respondents consist of political science majors at two Midwestern colleges, along with a small number of professors in political science. In Study 2, professional political scientists specializing in the American Presidency or national-election studies comprise the largest segment of our P-set; the remainder are political science majors from a course devoted to the American Presidency at one such Midwestern University in the Summer of 2005.

As Hershey (1992) observes, political time in the immediate wake of an election verdict is defined by a veritable blizzard of interpretations as to the meaning of the outcome. Since voters have no way of indicating on ballots themselves the rationale for their voting decisions, the political press finds itself in a bit of a bind: there are immense pressures to undertake and get into circulation commentaries and narratives proclaiming the most sensible and compelling account of the aggregate vote totals, which in the American system of presidential selection are actually comprised of more than four dozen discreet sets of separate results. In this process, of course, reporters are not entirely autonomous actors: for one thing, they rely heavily on exit-poll results which, despite

the problems they have encountered during the last pair of presidential elections—in the acrimonious aftermath of 2000, these problems were of such a magnitude that the polling firms and media outlets funding them basically agreed to toss them out. In 2004 there were also anomalies of bizarre proportions: done in three waves, results in the key battle-ground states had Kerry winning decisively in the morning and afternoon waves (notably in Florida and Ohio), leaving pundits and, reportedly, even advisors to the candidates with the distinct impression that the incumbent was very likely to lose. But to close observers, it was clear that something was amiss in the early polling: women, for example, were strongly overrepresented in the samples for the first two waves, a non-negligible deviation from random sampling that was especially troubling in light of the gender-gap that has characterized American electoral behavior for the past quarter century. The third and final wave of exit polls would supply journalists with a very different picture indeed, leading some pundits (for example, the election analysis team at the Fox News Channel) to dramatically reverse the course while on camera of its early emerging consensus that Bush, like his father, would go down as a one-term Chief Executive.

In addition, as Hershey notes, the respective campaigns are now regular participants in that they have well-practiced spin-meisters assigned to air their particular—and transparently self-serving—story on what the aggregate vote totals are saying in a collective sense. Finally, political reporters themselves, assisted by their trusted colleagues from the academic punditry ranks, are inevitably talking to one another. In the process, they will defer to colleagues whose track records on such matters earn them respect and deference as opinion-leaders, imbuing the entire enterprise with a “pack journalism” quality even at the outset of the postmortem phenomenon. Generally, then, the vagaries of the commercial news business coalesce with the political interests of the respective campaigns to fashion a story, under the pressures of deadline and market-driven measures of news value, that will in a real sense commence the onset of a post-election campaign whose political value, especially in the calculations of fellow politicians that will assume or retain Congressional seats, lies in the subjective sanction it gives to by the president-elect that “the people have spoken” and unmistakably present in the chorus of voices is a genuine *mandate to bring to fruition as law the victor’s campaign agenda*.

Hershey’s (1992) own use of content analysis of newspaper accounts in the 1984 election aftermath led her to observe that, in its early stages, the post-election campaign produces a wide variety of “constructed meanings,” and that over the course of time—a couple months—these will undergo a funneling effect that, by inauguration day, will reduce to a precious few. And as 1980 illustrates, the surviving explanations for the

outcome, notions taken as conventional wisdom by key political actors and the press, are not immune to dispute and debunking down the road, especially when the academic armies of electoral analysts have begun to lay out the results of their own inquiries into the meaning of a given outcome. Recall that conventional wisdom on Reagan's first victory was that it constituted a groundswell at the grassroots level toward the conservative policy positions put forward by the challenger during the campaign. That later on political-scientific studies of the electorate's behavior produced a very different appraisal—one closer to an account emphasizing gross dissatisfaction with Carter's inability to deliver on performance, not policy-substance, grounds—became oddly "academic" in the pejorative sense as such a reading had virtually no effect on policy achievements racked up by the Reagan team during the politically-consequential first year of his two terms in office. With that in mind, we look in the present research at the "mutability" of the so-called mandate claimed by George W. Bush in his reelection bid by soliciting Q sorts from reasonably well-informed onlookers at two points in time: the first in the inaugural period, the second some six-months into the incumbent's second term. We now turn to the results of the initial 2004 postmortem study.

### **Study 1: Postmortem Contention in the Early Post-election Campaign**

During January and February of 2005, forty individuals—some professional political scientists, some political reporters, and most undergraduate political science majors at two Midwestern institutions of higher learning—sorted the 35 items comprising the 2004 Postmortem Q sample. In so doing, they ranked the statements according to the customary "normal curve" format with scores ranging from +4 on the "most agree" end to -4 on the "most disagree" side. Subjected to centroid factor analysis, using both varimax and judgmental rotation, these rankings produced a five-factor solution, with three of the factors being bipolar in nature. Consequently, our first-wave results show considerable variation—a set of eight distinct stories—on the question of what the election results mean in narrative terms, what the key reasons for the outcome were, and what may or may not be taken as lessons from the aggregate vote totals.

#### **Factor 1: Congratulatory/Rationalization in Full Bloom: Fruits of Partisan Polarization**

Factor 1 is bipolar: at its positive end are eleven self-identified liberal Democrats; at its negative end are three conservative Republicans. (For reasons of space, the final rotated factor matrix is not included here; it is available, however, upon request from the authors.) Each of these individuals cast ballots in the 2004 race consistent with the partisan

affiliation: Democrats voted for Kerry, Republicans for Bush. Accordingly our focus on the more populous Democratic and positive end of the factor should not eclipse the fact that the negative loadings comprise a totally antithetical view. Consistent with Kingdon's (1966) observations on the post-election behavior of winning and losing candidates (as well as their supporters), these viewpoints reflect dramatic "congratulations vs. rationalization" effects. The three highest ranked statements in the Factor 1+ array display the latter, blaming voters first for their negligence in voting against their own economic self-interests (Statement 15) or for failing to inform themselves on crucial matters on which they became victims of their own ignorance (Statement 4). The story is not simply that voters are fools; there is also a shot across the bow of the Democratic ticket for failing to draw sufficient attention to the Bush Administration's "other war," namely its "war against the poor" (Statement 34).

15. *Call me crazy, but seems that millions of Americans voted against their own interests. Of the 28 states with the lowest per capita income, Bush carried 26. This Administration has been blunt about its desire to protect the rich, but who'd have thought that they be given a second term by the very people who suffer the most for it. (4 4 3 -2 0)*

4. *One can argue that ignorance played at least as big a role in the outcome as moral values. After all, polls tell us that a third of the president's supporters believe that weapons of mass destruction were found in Iraq; and more yet believe that a majority of world opinion favored the war. (4 1 -1 1 3)*

34. *The challenge for Democrats is to convince the so-called "values voters" in the heartland that they too are pro-family and patriotic. One place to start is to stand up and oppose the Bush Administration's "other war"—the war on work and working-class families. (4 2 2 -4 -1)*

Receiving significantly lower scores for Factor 1+ are statements indicting Democrats as either unwilling or unable to understand the difficulties ordinary families have in raising children today, in an environment where traditional, family values are under assault and Democratic candidates simply fall short of Republicans in conveying their understanding and appreciation of this challenge (Statement 16, -4). Likewise, statement 5's assertion that the result constitutes a consolidation of an electoral realignment, in which New Deal ascendancy has been fully supplanted by a new Republican majority, is resoundingly rejected by Factor 1+ (-3). Also evident at the extremes of Factor 1+, though the statement rankings fall short of the statistically distinguishing threshold, are strong denials that Bush "won big" on



election night (Statement 27, -3): the outcome constitutes a mandate (Statements 2, 26, both +3), instead of another “split verdict” or virtual dead heat by standards of the razor-thin margin of victory in key swing states (Statement 2, +3). Likewise, the rationalization effect can be seen in rejecting claims that Democrats are out of touch with ordinary Americans (Statement 8) or that Bush was a stronger candidate (Statement 22) rather than an unabashed opportunist who shamelessly exploited wedge issues such as gay marriage, which was a featured fixture on ballots in eleven key electoral battleground states, Ohio included (Statement 3). Again, the mirror-image opposite of these sentiments forms the animus of Factor 1-: Bush won big, voters were not fools, a realignment is essentially a *fait accompli*, and the Bush agenda received a resounding endorsement, signaling a true mandate in the fullest sense of the term.

### **Factor 2: Bipolarity Again: Dubious vs. Definite Mandate**

Factor 2 is also bipolar, with four Q sorts serving as defining variates, two positively and two negatively. The two negatively-loaded sorts are from Republicans; the positively-loaded are from a Democrat who voted for Kerry and an Independent who voted for Bush. In some respects, the positive end of the factor bears resemblance to a postmortem on the 1992 presidential election termed by Thomas and Baas (1996) as “Press Politics and Politicians.” Central to this schematic are considerations of campaign strategy and tactics so heavily emphasized in press coverage of electoral politics (Patterson, 1984). However, in this case the story is framed in a manner that faults liberal Democratic insensitivity to key contextual factors often ignored by political journalists for their alleged lack of “news value” (Kerbel, 2001)—namely, region and culture. Given the pivotal importance of key Southern states in the Electoral College, it was unseemly that Democrats would nominate a “Boston Brahmin” notwithstanding his selection of one-term Senator John Edwards from North Carolina as his running mate. And while this viewpoint is actually quite kind to Kerry in assessing the damage done by a slow and ineffective response to the so-called Swiftboat ads (television spots disparaging John Kerry’s service in Vietnam, found to be baseless by independent investigations of the charges) and the staging of a goose-hunting photo-op in Ohio to counter NRA appeal among rural voters (Statement 19, -3), there is a strong sense of incredulity on the part of Factor 2+ at the ticket’s inability to convey conviction or strength in an environment still defined by post-9/11 insecurities and angst (Statement 7, +3). As often put by former President Clinton, in such a time, “voters will prefer someone who is strong and wrong to one who is weak and right” (Statement 23, +3).

18. *When you look at the electoral geography, it doesn't add up that*

*Democrats would nominate a liberal Boston Brahmin whose vice-presidential pick could not erase a political fundamental: The South, which helped elect every Democratic president in history, has yet to give Democrats a single electoral vote in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. (-1 4 1 -1 -1)*

35. *By now you'd think that Democrats would wise up and take to heart the old adage that if you don't stand for anything, you're easy prey to an opponent who'll do the defining for you. But yet again, the standard bearer is pilloried as the personification of weakness and cultural conceit. It's déjà vu all over again. (-1 3 0 -3 -2)*

Like Factor 1, this is a viewpoint that is puzzled by the apparent propensity of so many voters to cast ballots drastically at odds with their own economic self-interests (Statement 15, +4). Otherwise, this is a view that finds the 2004 outcome disturbingly indecisive. The results, say proponents of this factor, can hardly be spun as a big triumph for the incumbent (Statement 27, -3); nor can they be read as a Red State demolition of pointy-headed and out-of-touch liberal sensibilities (Statement 24, -3). At best, the vote totals signify yet another split verdict and portend, for at least another four years, a virtual impasse on the critical and pressing issues that elections are, at least in theory, supposed to resolve (Statement 2, +4).

But, it bears repeating, precisely the opposite sentiments are embraced by the persons with significant yet negative loadings on Factor 2. Hence the four statements that emerge as “distinguishing” in the Factor 2 array under -4 and -3 bring illumination not only to what people at the other end of the factor are thinking in fashioning their own postmortems; at the same time, they signal an important dynamic: in the particular setting in which these views are crystallizing, they are doing so largely as a function of defending against and countering a set of subjective claims that, to them, are antithetical and unacceptable as candidates for conventional wisdom. One (Statement 28) centers on the significance of terrorist threats in the post-9/11 public mind: to positive loaders it receives a -4; to negative loaders a +4. Likewise there is sharp disagreement on the caliber and consequences of particular tactics employed by the Kerry campaign (Statement 19): positive-loaders denying much effect (-3), and negative-loaders reaching the opposite conclusion. There is further disagreement over the nature and role of values and how values do or do not reveal important differences in personal and politically relevant character (Statement 20, +4 for the end of the factor claiming a definitive mandate; -4 for the skeptics). Finally, there is in the Factor 2 dispute contrary assessments on the Theresa Heinz Kerry vs. Laura Bush comparison, with the pro-mandate forces claiming “victory” (Statement 25, +5) on this score, and the anti-mandate folks denying that the “first lady contest” was meaningfully

linked to the outcome in any way.

### **Factor 3: Democratic Shortfalls on “the Vision Thing:” Kerry’s Failure to Connect**

The third frame on the 2004 outcome is defined by Democrats disappointed and even dismayed at the ineffectiveness of John Kerry’s “message” in giving voters a compelling narrative for changing Commanders-in-Chief in a political context where, notwithstanding an ongoing war, the political environment was otherwise ripe of doing just that. The highest loading Q sort on Factor 3 is from a Professor of Communications who had previously worked as a campaign consultant for Democratic candidates. While the third factor array bears general affinities with the positive end of Factor 1 (the correlation, in fact, is a robust  $r = .49$  between the two sets of factor scores), there are nevertheless important differences in emphases that warrant close attention. For one thing, the third factor is not bipolar; for another, its reading of the election reflects a narrative that is unusually focused on a singular theme, namely the Kerry campaign’s unequivocal failure to capture the attention and the imagination of the electorate with a message sufficiently compelling to counter “the devil you know is safer than the devil you don’t know” doubts in an environment defined by a pervasive sense of insecurity and anxiety in the face of mounting evidence that all is not well in the land.

The gist of this assessment can be gleaned from the following statements and their scores, from which are omitted two sentiments that are part and parcel of all postmortems that are generally displeased by the final vote tallies. One is the question raised about voter attentiveness—or lack thereof—on key policy matters, particularly regarding Iraq policy (Statement 15, +3). The other is Bill Clinton’s warning that in a time of war, voters are inclined to set aside bread-and-butter, domestic-policy considerations, and opt for candidates who are “strong and wrong” rather than “weak and right” (Statement 23, +4).

10. *Democrats didn’t have much of a message other than “anybody but Bush.” Since Republicans did have a simple, understandable message, their victory is not surprising. Message plus mobilization will beat mobilization alone every time.* (–2 0 4 0 2)

22. *Voters seemed not especially enamored of either candidate, a problematic sign for an incumbent asked to be judged on his record. But if voters saw Bush metaphorically as an exclamation point, a man of fixed and firm view, they saw Kerry as a question mark, a credible but largely blank slate.* (–1 1 4 –2 2)

17. *Kerry never broke through with his litany of programs and positions. Bush, in contrast, had a narrative forged in the ashes of 9/11. “I’m going to protect you from the terrorists in Tikrit and the*

*homos in Hollywood.” What Democrats lack most of all is neither money nor motivation nor organization, but a compelling narrative. (1 -1 3 3 0).*

On the mandate question, Factor 3 is skeptical; and its sense of doubt mirrors the very premise of this research, i.e., that mandates in American electoral politics are rarely self-evident despite claims by winning candidates to the contrary. As put in statement 26, given a +3, by this factor: “. . . Short of a landslide, there hardly ever is [a mandate] in American politics. But that will not stop the President and his allies—including the folks at FOX news and on Talk Radio—from insisting that there is.” Elsewhere in the factor array are statements with scores disavowing claims that Democratic electoral performance is necessarily handicapped by structural considerations such as the current Electoral College (Statement 5, -4) combined with demographic trends of long duration (Statement 9, -3). There is also strong denial that the Democratic loss deserves to be treated as a “sound thrashing” (Statement 24, -4) or that Republicans have themselves so clearly dominated the “definition game” that liberalism per se in the public mind is unalterably a tarnished public philosophy at best or a toxic sensibility at worst in the war over the hearts and minds of average American families alarmed by the threats posed to hard-working parents by a coarsening culture where old verities are under assault (Statement 8, -2). In sum, there is nothing inevitable and beyond fixing in Democratic Party’s recent record of unimpressive electoral performance. And first and foremost among the items needing attention is absence of a compelling narrative within which Democratic candidates can frame issue-positions in a manner that is at once reassuring and exciting to swing voters looking in vain for signs of the “vision thing” in campaign communications of its nominees.

**Factor 4: If not a Republican Nation, We’re surely not Democrats:  
“It’s the Values, Stupid!”**

Like the third factor, Factor 4 is not bipolar; its defining variates are all in the form of Q sorts from self-proclaimed Republicans. And, to a degree, it constitutes the Republican version of the previous factor in that its chief reading of the post-election tea leaves in early 2005 is one that features communications/message deficiencies on the part of Democrats, but with a great deal more commendation in its casting of the GOP and conservative message in this election as self-evidently superior on the larger “values question” framed not in terms of discrete policy positions per se, but in terms of general and culturally salient concerns over morality and its perceived downward spiral in the country as a whole. While this factor shares the enthusiasm of Factor 1-toward the final vote tally in 2004, its joy is not entirely unrestrained. To

be sure, the main message for Democrats was, to borrow a phrase from Zell Miller (former Democratic Governor of Georgia who switched to the Republican party as a U.S. Senator, and delivered a stinging rebuke of his former partisan comrades at the Republican National Convention), was that it was definitely “a national party no more” (Statement 30, +4). And though the principal reason for this “fact” in Factor 4’s eyes is the yawning “values/decency gap” between Democratic icons and ordinary Americans (Statements 16 and 29, both +4), Factor 4 stops short of issuing a eulogy for its partisan foes based on the this election alone.

Indeed, statistically distinguishing statements fill all six cells of the negative end of the factor array, and among these rejected assertions are claims that the 2004 outcome signifies an end to political deadlock (Statement 9, -3), and that, nation-wide, the Democrats were soundly thrashed (Statement 24, -3). That such sentiments may in fact constitute over-reaching (or over-reading) the election’s message is rather forcefully brought home in a series of statement-rankings bearing on fortuitous factors from the Republican standpoint. Generally, this assessment concedes that Bush was a better campaigner—or, more accurately, the beneficiary of politically fortuitous tactical blunders on the part of Kerry and his campaign advisers (Statements 17 and 19, +3; Statement 35, -3, Statement 32, -4). Indeed, this is a viewpoint that is both grateful for, and baffled by, the Democratic Party’s inability to relate to, let alone connect with, the concerns and hopes of average Americans. This even extends to a sense of wonder and appreciation for what this factor sees as a more than a mere journalistic side-bar from the campaign: the differences in public affection for First Lady Laura Bush and the less-well-known and perceptibly less-restrained Mrs. Theresa Heinz Kerry (no. 25, +3). In sum, Factor 4 is happy with the outcome, but its enthusiasm is tempered by frank recognition that the margin of victory in key battleground states was very narrow, and in many ways Bush’s victory, notwithstanding uninspiring televised debate performances, owed a great deal to miscalculations, missteps, and mediocrity in the campaign of his opponent.

### **Factor 5: Two Tales on Terror and the War in Iraq: The Foreign Policy Frame**

The fifth factor from Study 1 is also bipolar, anchored at the positive end by Republican supporters of Bush’s foreign policy, specifically the War on Terror and US policy in Iraq. Against this background, Factor 5+, rather surprisingly, is alone among the 8 viewpoints (taking into account the 3 of our five factors that are bipolar) in framing the entire election around fears catalyzed but not confined to 9/11 and its aftermath:

28. *In the end, terrorism trumped everything. Yes, there were some voters who cited "moral values" as a decisive consideration, but the percentages were an artifact of the omission of abortion and ethical values from the exit-poll survey. The first presidential election after 9/11 was ultimately decided by voters' fears of another attack.* (0 -4 -2 -1 4)

1. *This is not a happy nation. This is an anxious nation. Terror, economic worries, health care, values—they were all in play, and Bush told a more compelling story about what's at the root of these feelings.* (1 0 0 0 2)

Even on its positive end, this is not a viewpoint saturated with unbridled enthusiasm. Peggy Noonan's enthusiastic declaration that "Bush won big" in spite of war and recession and with coattails (Statement 27) is assigned a -3 in the Factor 5+ composite. By the same token, it is willing to concede that voters were woefully misinformed on critical details involving the grounds for US military intervention in Iraq (Statement 4, +3). In the end, the electorate followed historical precedent and voted not to change Commanders-in-Chief while engaged in war. But their arrival at this judgment was neither a foregone conclusion nor a *fait accompli* owing to a pervasive sense of insecurity in the land. Had Kerry been able to mount a credible policy alternative on Iraq or, more generally, on issues tied to the generalized state of anxiety that were manifest more forcefully as cultural/values concerns than bread-and-butter economic issues, the outcome may well have been different. So once again, this is a factor (on the positive side) that credits Bush's election to Kerry's lack of clarity, if not unvarnished flip-flopping, in communicating an alternative to the President's policy on Iraq.

31. *Kerry never articulated where he stood on Iraq or, more importantly, how exactly he would be smarter and tougher than Bush in the war on terror. Every other issue—from taxes to gay marriage—was the proverbial frosting on the cake compared to this one.* (-2 -2 2 -2 3)

Nor was Kerry a credible voice on economic issues (no. 13, -4), despite the fact that his running mate John Edwards, moved by the disturbing chasm between economic haves and have-nots, took great pains to highlight such matters in his stump speech on the "Two Americas." And as with earlier factors, Factor 5+ finds Democrats chronically unable to reverse popular understandings that their party is simply out of touch with the challenges facing parents when the old-fashioned, even Christian pro-family values seem under assault by cultural and commercial institutions ranging from raunchy television programming to pervasive pornography accessible via the internet (no. 16, +3).

Finally, it is important to underscore that Factor 5, like its predecessors factors 1 and 2, houses an adversarial dualism: the factor scores cited above are hence precisely the reverse for self-proclaimed moderates and Kerry supporters located at the negative end of the factor. The prominence of this striking subjective polarization—signaling the existence of three pairs of tandem, antithetical points of view drawn from the raw ingredients of the same set of “facts” is in itself worthy of further scrutiny since it is largely absent from the small set of previous examinations of the post-election campaign. Accordingly, we revisit its possible roots in the immediate postmortem setting for the 2004 election in the discussion to follow our report of findings from Study 2.

### **Study 2: Operant Postmortems as Strategic Subjectivity Six Months into Bush’s Second Term**

As noted, a principal aim in this research is to examine Hershey’s (1992) proposition that “constructed meanings” for a given electoral result undergo a process of “winnowing” over time, condensing and coalescing in the process of an ongoing competition to forge “strategic political subjectivity” in a fashion favorable to the winning candidate as he seeks to transform an electoral coalition into a governing coalition (Seligman & Covington, 1989). To examine this proposition, we utilized the same  $N = 35$  statements of opinion on the 2004 results and solicited Q sorts from two populations of respondents. The first was comprised of professional political scientists, whose designated areas of expertise included either the study of the American Presidency or of American elections. Drawing upon membership data from the American Political Science Association, over a hundred such scholars were identified and mailed copies of the postmortem Q sample with a cover letter explaining the purposes of our research and soliciting their assistance in rendering their retrospectives on the election’s meaning by completing and sending by return mail their Q sorts along with information bearing on their political affinities (partisan and ideological self-identifications) and scholarly interests. This effort generated 18 Q sorts, provisionally treated as “considered opinion” on the question of the election’s meaning well into the first year of Bush’s second term.

The second set of respondents was comprised of student-members from a course on the American Presidency offered at Valparaiso University in the early Summer of 2005. The P set for Study 2 was therefore smaller and, on average, older and more politically engaged than the one for Study 1; however, it was by no means homogenous with respect to political self-identifications. To be sure, Democrats outnumbered Republicans among political scientists in the P set; but a third of these respondents identified themselves as either conservatives

or moderates—and closer to the Republican candidate—instead of liberal Democrats. In sum, while the P-set's composition warrants the usual disclaimers and qualifications as a small "sample of convenience," its limitations in demographic respects are more than counterbalanced by its credentials as a set of professionally-trained readers of political (and electoral) "tea leaves" brought to harvest by the 2004 national election. The  $n = 28$  Q sorts were correlated and factor analyzed via the centroid method, and a variety of solutions and rotational schemes were deployed through available options in PQMethod (Schmolk & Atkinson, 2002). Ultimately, a three-factor solution (with combined varimax and judgmental rotation) was deemed most satisfactory in approximating "simplest structure" (Stephenson, 1953; Brown, 1980; McKeown & Thomas, 1988). The final rotated matrix, again omitted here for reasons of space (and available upon request from the authors), reveals that 24 of the 28 respondents produced Q sorts with significant loadings on one or more of the trio of factors, and in 22 of these cases the loadings were purely associated with one factor only.

#### **Factor X: From Congratulations/Rationalization to Gloating vs. Resentment**

The first of our Time-2 factors is bipolar, anchored at the positive and negative ends by Q sorts from six liberal Democrats and three conservative Republicans, respectively. As such, it bears a strong overall resemblance to Factor 1 from the first study. (Indeed, a second-order factor analysis confirms this with the two first-order factors correlated at  $r = .80$ .) Even so, the impression left by the composite rankings of statements in the Time-2 factor scores is that the effect of political time on the debate over the election's meaning has been to intensify its shrill, partisan character rather than to temper it in the service of muting the polarization catalyzed by the election itself. As before, those supporting the losing candidate express dismay at the apparent propensity of voters to blatantly disregard their own economic self-interests in casting ballots for an incumbent seemingly bent on protecting and serving the rich (Statement 15, +4). And again there is sharp disagreement on whether the outcome constituted a clear-cut positive and personal referendum on George W. Bush himself. Statement 27, Peggy Noonan's assertion that "Bush won and won big. . ." is given a -4 by positive loaders (and hence the reverse by negative loaders). Elsewhere, however, the seeds of discontent registered in the first study's Factor 1+ have sharpened, taking on a more combative, even sarcastic, tone at Time 2:

14. *Maybe this time voters chose what they actually want: Nationalism, preemptive war, fiscal irresponsibility, a widened gulf between haves and have-nots, backlash against women and gays,*



*“safety” through torture, government largesse for their churches, and a my-way-or-the-highway President. Where does that leave us? (3 -4 -3)*

34. *The challenge for Democrats is to convince so-called “values voters” in the heartland that they too are pro-family and patriotic. One place to start is to stand up and oppose the Bush Administration’s “other war” – the war on work and working-class families. (3 -1 0)*

13. *The Democrats’ strategy turned on the proposition that they could trump the cultural concerns of middle-class families through economic appeals. If there ever was an election where asking voters to vote their pocketbooks should’ve worked, it was this one, and it didn’t. (2 -1 -2)*

The view at the other end of this factor, of course, is precisely the reverse: voters were not acting in ignorance in casting ballots contrary to their class interests; Democrats failed to connect on pervasive cultural themes and fears; and the “values gap” between the two parties and their respective standard bearers was palpable and definitely in play on election day (see, e.g., Statements. 8, 16, and 33).

### **Factor Y: Campaign and Communications Pieces: A Republican Tactical Triumph**

Our second Time-2 factor is anchored by five purely-loaded sorts and three others with split loadings on this and either Factor 1 or 3. The mix of Republican and Democratic political scientists (no non-political scientists have significant loadings)—along with the absence of detectable bipolarity found in so many of the previously-discussed factors—makes this account far and away the most impressively “bipartisan” (or non-partisan) reading of the 2004 election to emerge in this research. Unlike a factor found from the Thomas-Baas Q study of the 1992 race, however, the view of this particular group of political scientists cannot be characterized in classical disciplinary tendencies to view election outcomes as essentially referenda on the incumbent’s performance. In other words, Factor Y is not a stance that features “retrospective voting” in the traditional sense (Key, 1966; Fiorina, 1981). Instead, it portrays the Republican victory as chiefly due to the caliber of its campaign compared to that waged by the Democrats, an assessment that does give a role to Democratic troubles in the cultural-symbolic realm. (Statement 18, indicting Kerry as a “Boston Brahman,” and item 33, assailing Democrats for undervaluing cultural fears, are both ranked +4 in this factor). Otherwise, this factor stops well short of detecting a policy-based interpretation of the outcome; indeed, it issues strong warnings against the pull of partisan inclinations to make much at all

either way about the 2004 message mandate-wise.

11. *Karl Rove did a masterful job in recognizing that this was a turnout election and it was critical to get social conservatives to the polls in Ohio and elsewhere with anti-gay marriage initiatives. Kerry's brain trust had no countervailing strategy. (0 4 2)*

33. *One message in the election is that millions of voters in red states simply do not believe that Democrats take their cultural fears and resentments seriously, and that Republicans do. (-2 4 1)*

20. *While it may be clear to all just how indebted the Bush-Cheney ticket is to Christian evangelical voters in their organizational efforts in the battleground states especially, there will be some elements of the Republican leadership who'd likely forget this if they could. They had better not. (-1 3 1)*

To the degree that policy played a role at all, it did so through the prism of campaign performance: Kerry was ambiguous at best on putting forward clear alternatives to Bush on Iraqi policy (no. 31, +2). And the Bush team's advantages with respect to terrorism and gay-marriage were viewed less as genuine policy contrasts—Statement 28's claim that "terrorism trumped everything" earned the lowest score in the Factor Y array—than as tactical vehicles for mobilizing turnout among rank-and-file voters in pivotal swing states. In short, the Republicans prevailed because they are better at playing the game of election-campaign politics than are Democrats in the post-Clinton era. In fairness, however, Factor Y's generosity in lavishing kudos on the likes of Karl Rove is not unqualified: Democrats begin national-electoral contests with a huge disadvantage in the geopolitical landscape.

30. *Democrats simply don't have a true national party. They are hugely popular on both coasts, but that's not enough. In the 23 uncontested red states, Bush held Kerry to 40 percent and ran up an 8 million vote margin. That's more than 200 electoral votes in states where they hold 39 out of 46 Senate seats. That's a huge head start! (-2 3 -2)*

### **Factor Z: Scholarly Skepticism: What Mandate?**

The third second-wave factor is defined by eight Q sorts, six of which were provided by political scientists with mixed partisan and ideological affinities. Included in the latter grouping are three eminent political scientists whose own records of research on electoral and presidential politics are of such note that their gravitation to this particular account in itself makes it worthy of note. Before jumping to the conclusion that this warrants treatment of the last of our retrospectives a measure of scholarly *gravitas* arguably unmatched by the previous Time 2 factors, it bears noting that the correlation between the first and third views is of rather startling magnitude ( $r = .49$ ) for ostensibly orthogonal factors.

Yet when distinguishing statements for Factor Z are examined, it quickly becomes apparent that this is a voice of caution, reminding parties to the post-election campaign that electoral mandates in American politics are almost always mythical creatures. And the outcome in 2004 is certainly no exception in this regard.

*2. It's tempting to read the results as a mandate, but the message is that there is a split verdict on Bush's presidency. In every swing state nationwide, the president's approval rating was about 51 percent, not much more, not much less. (2 4 2)*

Many statements found at the upper and lower ends of the Factor Z array are not ranked significantly higher or lower than in the Factor X+ array, a discovery not altogether surprising given the high correlation between the two. Like X+, Z is not convinced that the Bush re-election can be taken to signify the end of electoral deadlock and the onset of a rolling realignment (Statement 6, +3; Statement 9, -3) en route to a full-fledged Republican majority. Accordingly, there is skepticism as well toward the claim that the Democrats have become unalterably marginalized in national politics by virtue of their desertion of mainstream American values and/or their defection from moderate issue-stances in favor of out-of-fashion liberal ones (Statement 24, -3; Statement 8, -4). Likewise, there is a consensus on the political legacy of 9/11, namely that it continues to have a damping effect on efforts to raise domestic issues to the pivotal status they enjoyed under the New Deal and Clinton eras (no. 7, +3). Factor Z, however, differs from X+ on the question of voter sensibilities, stopping short of attributing the outcome to widespread ignorance and misinformed, contra-pocketbook reasoning on the part of the "red state" electorate (Statement 4, +2; Statement 15, +1).

The starkest difference between the two sets of factor scores shows up in the rankings for three items. Number 14, cited above in connection with Factor X+, expresses an ironic sense of Democratic frustration with voter choices, saying in effect that this time they may well get what they deserve, including an illegitimate war, fiscal irresponsibility and the like. Given a +3 by Factor X, this item gets a -3 for Factor Z. The remaining pair of statistically distinguishing items appears below:

*25. No doubt there are few voters who would admit it, but for an unknown portion of the electorate in a closely-contested race, Theresa Heinz Kerry may have been a costly—and decisive—liability in the minds of many trying to imagine her as replacement for Laura Bush as First Lady. (-1 -2 -4)*

*28. In the end, terrorism trumped everything. Yes, there were some voters who cited "moral values" as a decisive consideration, but the percentages were an artifact of the omission of abortion and ethical*

*values from the exit-poll survey. The first presidential election after 9/11 was ultimately decided by voters' fear of another attack. (-1 - 4 4)*

The last item, read in conjunction with the +3 assigned to Statement 7 on the “frozen” political environment created by 9/11, gives this factor a “foreign-policy” flavor reminiscent of Factor 5 from Study 1. But that factor was framed around the wisdom (or lack thereof) of U.S. policy in Iraq. In this instance, it is the lingering effects of the trauma of 9/11 and the fears it unleashed that trumps all other issues in 2004. In short, Factor Z’s reading of the election result is—excluding a critical caveat—consistent with a traditional “retrospective” account commonplace in political science’s approach to national elections and their meanings. What makes it different is that macro-economic performance under (or during) the incumbent’s watch, typically the critical consideration among retrospective voters, is relegated to a position of virtual irrelevance. Fear—of another cataclysmic terrorist attack, and of the wisdom of changing Commanders-in-Chief in the context of such a threat—thus becomes the pivot-point on which the election turned. Consequently, a vast number of political problems on the domestic front are not addressed, let alone resolved, by the 2004 results. And hence the warning: though pundits and pro-Bush allies in the media will trumpet the vote as providing Bush with a clear mandate (Statement 26, +3), it would be foolhardy to take such claims seriously, let alone grant them credence as anything more than grist for the post-election campaign.

### **Discussion: The Mutable Mandate, Myth, and The “Politics of Meaning” in a Contentious Time**

Taken in their entirety, the foregoing results provide compelling, if not incontrovertible, corroboration for Hershey’s (1992) claims—supported by a two-wave content-analysis of print-journalists’ accounts of the 1984 election outcome—that aggregate election results, in the immediate wake of a given campaign, assume the ontological status as “constructed explanations,” which thereafter undergo circulation and competition as candidates for conventional wisdom. As such, these rival accounts are “tested” against one another, not in accordance with what would qualify as scientific means, but rather in a more fluid and subjectively dynamic way designed to distill “a plausible story-line” deemed by members of the political press and politicians alike as *received wisdom* on the election’s meaning in the public mind.

In at least one critical respect, our own findings lend support to Hershey’s “winnowing hypothesis:” Using the same sample of statements, drawn from media sources engaged in fashioning a serviceable take on the 2004 election—and hence building, in the parlance of Q methodology, a rich concourse of diverse subjectivity in this post-

mortem—administered to two sets of politically-engaged observers at different points in time, we see precisely what Hershey has postulated: Whereas at Time 1, no fewer than eight (counting both ends of bipolar factors) interpretations of the 2004 elections emerged as Q-factor candidates for the mantle of conventional wisdom on the outcome, at Time 2, the pool of still-viable story-lines has been (counting bipolar factor X) reduced to four. However, having noted what appears to be a durable parallel in the “subjective selection” process underway in the aftermath of presidential contests separated by vast quantities of political time and space, findings from our earlier examination of the 1992 election—and, indeed, considerations introduced by Hershey herself in “explaining” what she found in 1984—caution against the temptation to take the “winnowing postulate” itself as having hereby established its credentials as an expected fixture of the post-election campaign in any American race for the White House, whether past, present, or future. To introduce this note of caution is not to discard altogether the significance of our discovery that, over time, 2004 postmortems do seem to undergo distillation, but to ask what this might signify. How, in other words, would we account for the Time 1 vs. Time 2 difference here (either consistent with or contrary to Hershey’s observations for 1984)? Moreover, how are we to appraise the *political meaning* of the still-unfinished battle to bring closure to 2004’s struggle over what the whole electoral spectacle signifies in crucial, politically-strategic ways?

### **Myth, Meaning, and the Disputable, Mutable Mandate**

“A nation,” as Benjamin Barber (2003) reminds us, “creates its past no less than its future” (p. 47). In the context of contemporary American politics, the pertinence of this notion is perhaps most forcefully and acrimoniously illustrated in the public’s contrasting assessments of the Chief Executive. Given the centrality of the presidential office and occupant to media accounts of what government is (or is not) doing by way of addressing (or neglecting) items on (or off) the public-policy agenda, coupled with ongoing appraisals of how adequately (or not) interests of the full range of parties to democratic conflict achieve good-faith representation and consideration (and ultimately reconciliation) in the policy process, it is hardly a surprise that, in the public mind, the American President is endowed with yet another “hat” in the constellation of powers and responsibilities lacking formal articulation in Article 2 of the Constitution. According to Mary Stuckey (1991), this aspect of presidential power is perhaps no less important than the traditional ones of Chief Executive and Commander-in-Chief, and its mythic, meaning-making character is at least partially captured by her volume on the matter, instructively entitled *The Interpreter-in-Chief*.

For our purposes, this vantage point on the modern American Presidency underscores what is at stake in the post-election campaign. In a sense, it extends Edelman's (1988) more generalized argument to the effect that, to "most ordinary citizens, the political world . . . appears not as an endless compendium of unadulterated facts but as a succession of *political spectacles* the meanings for which are *constructed*" (Thomas & Baas, 1996, p. 310). This is especially true for electoral politics where, according to Edelman (1988), the major message of *any* election result is "always ambiguous and usually controversial" (p. 95), which of course is as far as one can get from one of the great, enduring myths of American democracy—namely, that when "the people have spoken," what it is that they said will be "plain to all and specific enough to be directive in shaping the course of future public policy" (Kelley, 1983, p. 126). If nothing else, the brief history of scholarly scrutiny devoted to such matters has confirmed that electoral mandates are quintessentially matters of *myth and meaning*; as such, they have become an important venue for what Ginsberg and Shefter (2002) describe as the principal and unseemly means by which political conflict is waged in the current "post-electoral era:" i.e., "politics by other means" (Conley, 2003; Hershey, 1992; Thomas & Baas, 1996). As has been noted, Ronald Reagan's 1980 victory over Jimmy Carter led pundits and political actors alike to a mythical conclusion—dramatically at odds with the political-science community's alternative understanding (that 1980 was a classic and unexceptional case of a "negative retrospective" in which a majority of voters in effect voted *against* Jimmy Carter notwithstanding far greater sympathy for his policy positions than those endorsed by the challenger [Wattenberg, 1991]). Even the much-heralded 1994 Congressional elections, which ended forty years of Democratic dominance in the House of Representatives and featured as grounds for its claims of an electoral mandate the so-called "Contract with America" can be sited as a relevant case in point. Despite the spectacle of a Newt Gingrich-led House assuming center-stage during its first hundred days in office—a development leading many to conclude that 1994's mandate energized a policymaking transformation that, in effect, put the House Republican leadership at the helm of a parliamentary-style legislative majority utterly convinced of its capacity to alter and enact a programmatic agenda of truly revolutionary proportions. But when the dust began to settle, rifts between Gingrich and his lieutenants, on the one hand, and Republican backbenchers on the other, began to surface and slow down the House-centered policy juggernaut. In retrospect, these fissures seemed small indeed when viewed against the Republican-controlled Senate's non-cooperative stance toward important House initiatives and, later still and far more consequential, President Clinton's refusal to acquiesce in the face of House Republican

hard-ball tactics over fiscal-policy differences. Two government shut-downs later, even Republican House leaders were conceding that they'd "over-interpreted" their mandate from the 1994 elections, affording yet another – though countervailing – reminder of the political stakes at play in the subjective construction of election messages.

Mandates, then, are arguably whatever the winning candidate or party is able to make of them. But their leeway in fashioning a story-line here—which in turn fuels political momentum as a subjective yet strategically invaluable form of political capital—falls far short of limitless. For one thing, not all election outcomes are equally ambiguous. The results of the 2006 congressional elections, for example, are less susceptible to the multiplicity of meanings surrounding the 2004 outcome. Like 1994, but in reverse, Democrats prevailed in impressive fashion, ultimately recapturing control of both the House and Senate for the final two years of Bush's second term. But even such decisively one-sided results fall short of furnishing their own, unassailable narratives. If nothing else, it would be prudent to anticipate congratulations/rationalizations effects in the wake of what were historically qualify as electoral landslides. As Levi-Strauss (1978), among many others, has reminded us: myths are essentially "stories we tell ourselves about ourselves;" hence, while they may not pass muster as scientifically provable (or refutable) truth-claims, that in no way diminishes their functional importance in lending order or sensibility to what might otherwise be experienced as unrelenting chaos, confusion and unmanageable conflict throughout a given culture. In appraising alternative "solutions" to the mutable mandate problem, then, our task is not to erect some kind of "test" against which the respective retrospectives on 2004 are assessed for their relative "truth value." Rather the challenge is fundamentally *hermeneutic* in its approach to myth: Why *these particular* subjective accounts? And, as in the present case, when they appear suspended in a state of contentious flux, what political meaning are we to glean from this condition?

### **Selective Memory, Mood, and the Limits of Partisan "Framing" Effects**

Viewed at one level, there is little in these results to suggest that the contest for closure on the major message of the 2004 elections is anywhere close to completion. Indeed, with less than a year remaining in the Bush 43 presidency, and with the President's approval rating at an all-time low, it would seem doubtful that the "heroic" story-line trumpeting the 2004 election outcome as a big Bush win, while firmly in place in both waves of our research, would survive intact very far if at all into the 2008 election cycle. But it is of more than passing interest that in both waves of our investigation, the most "winner-friendly" account of

the Bush victory was found at one end of a bipolar factor. Indeed, in the second wave, the tone and tenor of the “anti-mandate” retrospectives are, if anything, more resolute and resentful than was the case at Time 1. The intervening months, in other words, not only failed to produce a crystallized version of conventional wisdom satisfactory to supporters of the winner and loser alike; it witnessed an intensification of the polarization that in less-contentious times is found to dissipate in the aftermath of a national election (Thomas & Baas, 1996).

While this discovery illuminates a troubling feature of our current political climate—an era, after all, that is accompanied by a stylized vernacular of “red states” vs. “blue states” drawn from television-news graphics reporting electoral results from the last two, bitterly-contested, presidential elections—it should not be reified to the point that it obscures less-dramatic messages drawn by those seeking to discern the major lessons of 2004. Yet neither do we want to simply set aside (or postpone until another day) an examination of the “antagonistic, polarized political subjectivity” so central to our age (despite a vigorous argument to the contrary mounted by Fiorina [2005]). How, then, are we to explain (or make sense of) this subjectively-polarized state in the public mind? To begin with, it warrants emphasis that there is no such thing as “immaculate perception” in deciphering meaning from inherently ambiguous and frequently contentious political events (Edelman, 1988; Lakoff, 1996, 2004). As Stephenson (1972, p. 17) put it decades ago, in calling for the kind of intensive investigation of public opinion reported here, it is the public itself—readers of newspapers, radio listeners, and television viewers—who determine what will become firmly factualized” (in mass communication research; this point is made with evidence drawn from the controversial case of Lt. Calley by Brenner and Mauldin (1974). Human cognition, even at its best, never occurs in a vacuum; and the significance of this for political meaning-making is perhaps best illustrated in findings deriving from the close study of human memory.

. . . With roots extending back to Bartlett’s (1932) *Remembering*, the empirical record of memory research leaves little doubt that recollection, recall, and understanding of prior events and experiences are clearly amenable to active reconstruction and reorganization – quite often dramatically so, yet with virtually subliminal subtlety—in response to more recent or contemporaneous experience or stimuli (Loftus, 1979). [Thomas & Baas, 1996, p. 325].

In our study of the Clinton Administration’s failure to garner support for its own preferred story-line on the 1992 election—“Triumph of a New Democrat”—we drew attention to the *priming effects* of news stories and



reality-based signs of discord and disarray within the first six months of the Clinton first term. These events, we argued, deafened observers to the story-line the White House was pushing in its own retrospective why Clinton won and what the outcome signified for a genuine “third way” politics. Likewise, Hershey’s (1992) account of the 1984 version of conventional wisdom was perceptibly influenced by routine meetings of DNC officials in the post-election environment, meetings which primed press observers with cues that Reagan’s reelection fit a narrative consistent with “Troubles with the Democrats” instead of the less-compelling but closer to the truth notion political science offered under the “positive retrospective” label. In the context of Bush’s remarkably partisan and polarized presidency (Jacobson, 2007), priming and framing (Lakoff, 2004) effects are arguably more powerful and partisan in character, in part because of recent changes in the structural dissemination and consumption of news, and in part because of the political context in which news organizations operate.

The rise of “alternative” news sources is one consequence of the structural change. Citizens now have a large menu of options available—running from Cable News and Talk Radio, where the once-clear line between news reporting and editorial commentary that governed political-journalistic practice a generation ago (Rucker, 1967) has virtually been erased, to customized daily news summaries and, for the partisan junkies, an internet blogosphere beckons to stoke the fires of alternate, even incommensurate, takes on political reality. Perhaps by virtue of its ratings and its lack of subtlety, the Fox News Channel stands as the model of how ostensibly neutral (“we report, you decide”) journalistic promise is jettisoned without apology in crafting a daily dose of indignation and outrage, aimed typically at a caricatured depiction of the left as anti-American at best and irreparably evil at worst. In such an environment, it is hardly unexpected that political discourse would degenerate into the antagonist divide depicted in our bipolar factors. With books by Bill O’Reilly, Sean Hannity, and Anne Coulter all locating the root of what ails us in their love-to-hate liberal political-ideological whipping boy—all with the insinuation that this is no mere opponent in a public-policy debate, but an enemy on matters ranging from piety to patriotism—counter-punches by the likes of Michael Moore, Maureen Dowd or Al Franken are as predictable as they are inspiring to the like-minded readers on their end of the bipolar debate. In this manner, does political communication in the current era take on the properties of a proverbial food fight—resembling more the shrill, even abusive exchanges displacing dialogue in the truly dysfunctional family than the good faith airing of differences that is vital to genuine democratic deliberation. Against this backdrop, it bears reiteration that the concourse for our 2004 postmortem, sampled as it was from media

accounts of the election, no doubt itself gives faithful expression to what is an undeniably antagonistic and contentiously partisan moment in American politics.

Memory research, however, also reminds us that our abilities to reconstruct replicas of our common past are subject to powerful “mood” or “emotional climate effects.” At the individual level, perhaps the most extreme illustrations come from patients suffering from Post-traumatic Stress Disorder. Under safe, predictable circumstances, the likelihood of flashbacks or more extended recall of the traumatizing event(s) is minimized; but under conditions of threat or stress, triggers abound that activate the painful, repressed material, often with severe consequences for the victim of the trauma. Likewise, political memory is no doubt powerfully affected by mood-states which, in the vernacular of contemporary neurological parlance, are more “right-brain” in nature than “left-brain.” The latter is home to logic, evidence and analysis; the former houses the neural networks that are more emotional, pre-linguistic, and intuitive. And it is on this note that we recall Stephenson’s (1953) claim that factors, as subjective operants, are in effect states of mind, and as such, they reflect both “substantive” and “transitive” thought; and no matter how anchored in ideas and logic and evidence, they are animated by a “feeling tone.”

Viewed in this light, it seems sensible to regard the ongoing debate over prevailing wisdom on the 2004 presidential election’s “ultimate message and meaning” as unlikely to reach closure any time soon, even perhaps with a pervasive victory at the polls for Democrats in 2008. At the same time, we would be foolish to dismiss what has been discovered here as mere and sheer subjectivity suspended, as it were, in a perpetual state of flux and/or unknown proximity to what history eventually concludes about this moment in political time. Indeed, we would counsel precisely the opposite stance: that these findings provide an important vantage point on the nature of American political life as it is experienced in an historically uncertain and non-tranquil time. As such, they tell us a great deal about the human need to find or create meaning in such circumstances and, when differentially expressed in contending narratives, the conflict generated by this quest for meaning becomes itself a part—and energizing core—of the larger story.

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**Appendix: Statements and Factor Scores for Both Studies of 2004 National Election Postmortem**

Statements	Factor Scores							
	Study 1					Study 2		
	1	2	3	4	5	X	Y	Z
1. This is not a happy nation. This is an anxious nation. Terror, economic worries, health care, values—they were all in play, and Bush told a more compelling story about what's at the root of these feelings.	0	0	0	0	2	-2	-1	0
2. Its tempting to read the results as a mandate, but the message is that there is a split verdict on Bush's presidency. In every swing state nationwide, the president's approval rating is about 51 percent, not much more, not much less.	3	4	2	2	0	2	2	4

<b>Statements</b>	<b>Factor Scores</b>							
	<b>Study 1</b>					<b>Study 2</b>		
	<b>1</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>X</b>	<b>Y</b>	<b>Z</b>
3. Kerry was a credible challenger, but Bush won by countering a negative referendum on Iraq and the economy with a reputation for strength on terrorism and most importantly by using opposition to same-sex marriage and a very effective ground game to mobilize religious conservatives.	3	2	0	1	-1	0	3	4
4. One can argue that ignorance played at least as big a role in the outcome as moral values. After all, polls tell us that a third of the president's supporters believe that weapons of mass destruction were found in Iraq; and more yet believe that a majority of world opinion favored the war.	4	1	1	1	3	4	0	2
5. The outcome reflects the effects of longstanding demographic and structural changes. Just look at the map: a major electoral realignment underway for over 40 years has been consolidated and solidified.	-3	0	-4	1	1	-3	-3	0
6. Enough already about the triumphant Republican majority! If 60,000 votes shift in Ohio the media would be talking about the ascendancy of blue state values in America.	2	1	0	2	-3	3	1	3
7. Political dynamics have lost their fluidity in the post-9/11 environment; indeed, despite all the time, money and energy spent on the campaign, the distribution of red and blue states changed very little. It's like political time has frozen: we're still a divided country.	2	3	-2	2	2	-1	-4	3

<i>Statements</i>	<b>Factor Scores</b>							
	<b>Study 1</b>					<b>Study 2</b>		
	<b>1</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>X</b>	<b>Y</b>	<b>Z</b>
8. Democrats and the media have gotten it wrong by blaming their loss on the evangelical Christian vote. Democrats just don't get it: they lost because they underestimated the majority's disgust at what liberals stand for and what they wrought upon America.	-4	-1	-2	-1	-4	-4	0	-4
9. The election pulled us away from deadlock. We're now clearly not the country that was 49-49. We're now at 51-48, which may seem small and incremental, but from the longer view, it seems undeniably part of a rolling realignment.	-3	-1	-3	-3	-1	-3	1	-3
10. Democrats didn't have much of a message other than "anybody but Bush." Since Republicans did have a simple, understandable message, their victory is not surprising. Message plus mobilization will beat mobilization alone every time.	-2	0	4	0	2	0	4	2
11. Karl Rove did a masterful job in recognizing that this was a turnout election and it was critical to get social conservatives to the polls in Ohio and elsewhere with anti-gay marriage initiatives. Kerry's brain trust had no countervailing strategy.	1	0	1	1	1	0	-3	2
12. The vote is yet another reminder that "crime pays" in the real world of electoral politics. If succeeding in American politics means defining the other guy - even if it perpetrates the "Big Lie"—voters will have a long wait for honest differences over tough choices.	1	2	-1	-1	-2	2	-3	-1

<i>Statements</i>	<i>Factor Scores</i>							
	<i>Study 1</i>					<i>Study 2</i>		
	<i>1</i>	<i>2</i>	<i>3</i>	<i>4</i>	<i>5</i>	<i>X</i>	<i>Y</i>	<i>Z</i>
13. The Democrats' strategy turned on the proposition that they could trump the cultural concerns of middle-class families through economic appeals. If there was ever an election where asking voters to vote their pocketbooks should've worked, it was this one, and it didn't.	1	2	-3	0	-4	2	-1	-2
14. Maybe this time the voters chose what they actually want: Nationalism, pre-emptive war, fiscal irresponsibility, a widened gulf between haves and have-nots, backlash against women and gays, "safety" through torture, government largesse for their churches, and a my-way-or-the-highway President. But where does that leave us?	2	0	-4	-2	-4	3	-4	-3
15. Call me crazy, but it seems that millions of Americans voted against their own interests. Of the 28 states with the lowest per capita income, Bush carried 26. This administration has been blunt about its desire to protect the rich, but who'd have thought that they'd be given a second term by the very people who suffer the most for it.	4	4	3	-2	0	4	-1	1
16. If liberals weren't able to see the writing on the wall beforehand, maybe now they might finally get it: it has become a lot harder in contemporary America to raise a family when old-fashioned, conservative—and, yes, even Christian—morals are constantly under assault on every front. And Democrats can remain ignorant of this at their own peril.	-4	-2	-1	4	3	-4	-3	-2

Statements	Factor Scores							
	Study 1					Study 2		
	1	2	3	4	5	X	Y	Z
17. Kerry never broke through with his litany of programs and positions. Bush, in contrast, had a narrative forged in the ashes of 9/11. "I'm going to protect you from the terrorists in Tikrit and the homos in Hollywood." What Democrats lack most of all is neither money nor motivation nor organization, but a compelling narrative.	1	-1	3	3	0	1	1	1
18. When you look at the electoral geography, it doesn't add up that Democrats would nominate a liberal Boston Brahmin whose vice- presidential pick could not erase a political fundamental: The South, which helped elect every Democratic president in history, has yet to give Democrats a single electoral vote in the 21st century.	-1	4	1	-1	-1	2	4	-2
19. Kerry made some crucial (and, in the end, probably fatal) errors: not responding instantly to the Swift Boat nonsense, staging a photo-op in that silly goose-hunting outfit, letting Bush get away with saying drugs from Canada were not safe. He seemed to run as if he were trying not to lose rather than to win. That did not inspire confidence.	0	-3	0	3	4	1	2	0
20. While it may be clear to all just how indebted the Bush-Cheney ticket is to Christian evangelical "values" voters for their organizational efforts in the battleground states especially, there will be some elements of the Republican leadership who'd likely forget this if they could. They had better not.	-2	-1	-1	1	1	-1	3	1



<i>Statements</i>	<i>Factor Scores</i>							
	<i>Study 1</i>					<i>Study 2</i>		
	<i>1</i>	<i>2</i>	<i>3</i>	<i>4</i>	<i>5</i>	<i>X</i>	<i>Y</i>	<i>Z</i>
21. Though you won't hear many hawking this view, it could nonetheless be argued that the election was actually a defeat for Bush. No sitting president during a war has ever lost a reelection bid, and Republicans ought to be very curious about why the outcome was ever in doubt.	0	1	-1	-2	1	0	-2	-1
22. Voters seemed not especially enamored of either candidate, a problematic sign for an incumbent asking to be judged on his record. But if voters saw Bush metaphorically as an exclamation point, a man of fixed and firm view, they saw Kerry as a question mark, a credible but largely blank slate.	-1	1	4	2	2	1	0	2
23. The election confirmed the axiom that people are inclined to believe in the truth of ideas that they see deeply held and strongly asserted. Put another way by former President Clinton, in a time of war, voters will prefer someone who is strong and wrong to one who is weak and right.	1	3	4	0	4	1	1	1
24. No doubt about it: Democrats were soundly thrashed in this election up and down the ballot as Red America takes on "continental" proportions. They have finally paid the price for deserting mainstream American values and common sense.	-4	-3	-4	-3	-1	-3	-2	-4

<b>Statements</b>	<b>Factor Scores</b>							
	<b>Study 1</b>					<b>Study 2</b>		
	<b>1</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>X</b>	<b>Y</b>	<b>Z</b>
25. No doubt there are few voters who would admit it, but for an unknown portion of the electorate in a closely contested race, Teresa Heinz Kerry may have been a costly - and decisive - liability in the minds of many trying to imagine her as a replacement for Laura Bush as First Lady.	-1	-4	-	3	-2	-1	-2	-4
26. Was there a mandate in this election? Of course not. Short of a landslide, there hardly ever is in American politics. But that will not stop the President and his allies -including the folks at FOX news and on Talk Radio - from insisting that there is.	3	-1	3	0	1	4	1	3
27. Bush won, and he won big. He won by three points in the so-called 50-50 nation. He did this after 9/11, war, recession. He did this with coattails - more senators and congressmen to support him. He did it mostly by himself, telling voters what he'd done and why he'd done it and then telling them what he'd do and how he'd do it.	-3	-3	-3	-1	-3	-4	-2	-3
28. In the end, terrorism trumped everything. Yes, there were some voters who cited "moral values" as a decisive consideration, but the percentages were an artifact of the omission of abortion and ethical values from the exit-poll survey. The first presidential election after 9/11 was ultimately decided by voters' fear of another attack.	0	4	-2	-1	4	-1	-4	4

<b>Statements</b>	<b>Factor Scores</b>							
	<b>Study 1</b>					<b>Study 2</b>		
	<b>1</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>X</b>	<b>Y</b>	<b>Z</b>
29. For voters, values are not just attitudes toward guns and gays; they are the experiences, priorities, and principles a president will employ in making critical decisions for our country. Values are the expression of the candidate's character.	0	-4	-2	4	0	-1	2	0
30. Democrats simply don't have a true national party. They are hugely popular on both coasts, but that's not enough. In the 23 uncontested red states. Bush held Kerry to 40 percent and ran up an 8 million vote margin. That's more than 200 electoral votes in states where they hold 39 out of 46 Senate seats. That's a huge head start!	-1	-2	1	4	-2	-2	3	-1
31. Kerry never articulated where he stood on Iraq or, more importantly, how - exactly - he would be smarter and tougher than Bush in the war on terror. Every other issue - from taxes to gay marriage - was the proverbial "frosting" compared to this one.	-2	-2	2	-2	3	0	2	-1
32. It simply boggles the mind, why the Kerry campaign would seek to engage voters in a serious discussion about the country's future by introducing Mr. Kerry to the national electorate in terms of his Vietnam War experience thirty-five years earlier.	-2	1	2	-4	0	-2	-1	-2
33. One message in the election is that millions of voters in red states simply do not believe that Democrats take their cultural fears and resentments seriously, and that Republicans do.	2	-2	1	-4	-3	-2	4	1

<b>Statements</b>	<b>Factor Scores</b>							
	<b>Study 1</b>					<b>Study 2</b>		
	<b>1</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>X</b>	<b>Y</b>	<b>Z</b>
34. The challenge for Democrats is to convince so-called "values voters" in the heartland that they too are pro-family and patriotic. One place to start is to stand up and oppose the Bush Administration's "other war" - the war on work and working-class families	4	2	2	-4	-1	3	-1	0
35. By now you'd think that Democrats would wise up and take to heart the old adage that if you don't stand for anything, you're easy prey to an opponent who'll do the defining for you. But yet again, the standard bearer is pilloried as the personification of weakness and cultural conceit. It's deja vu all over again.	-1	3	0	-3	-2	1	0	-1