SPECIAL
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American values

The triumph of the religious right

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It may look like that, but liberals should think again before despairing

IN A novel, set in the 1960s, by John Kennedy Toole, “A Confederacy of Dunces”, the hero, Ignatius Reilly, goes to a gay party to drum up political support.

In the centre of another knot [of guests] stood a lout in a black leather jacket who was teaching judo holds, to the great delight of his epicene students. “Oh, do teach me that,” someone near the wrestler screamed after an elegant guest had been twisted into an obscene position and then thrown to the floor to land with a crash of cuff-links and other, assorted jewelry. “Good gracious,” Ignatius spluttered. “I can see that we're going to have a great deal of trouble capturing the conservative rural red-neck Calvinist vote.”

Now, it seems, the conservative rural red-neck Calvinist vote has captured America. A plurality of voters, emerging from poll booths, said that the most important issue in the campaign had been “moral values”. It was not, it seemed, Iraq or the economy. And eight out of ten of these moralists voted for George Bush.

The thought that the anti-gay, anti-abortion Christian right had decided the election dismayed left-wing Americans. Garry Wills in the *New York Times* suggested that a fundamentalist Christian revival was in revolt against the traditions of the Enlightenment, on which the country is based. “I hope we all realise that, as of November 2nd, gay rights are officially dead. And that from here on we are going to be led even closer to the guillotine,” said Larry Kramer, a playwright and AIDS activist.

Secular Europeans wondered whether they and the Americans were now on different planets. The week before the election, Rocco Buttiglione had been forced to withdraw his nomination as a European Union commissioner because he had said that homosexuality was a sin, and that marriage exists for children and the protection of women. In America, he would probably have won Ohio.

Der Spiegel, Germany's most popular newsweekly, put the statue of liberty on its cover, blindfolded by an American flag. Britain's *Daily Mirror* asked, “How can 59,054,087 people be so DUMB?” And a contributor to *Pravda*, that bastion of religious expertise, claimed that “the Christian fundamentalists of America are the mirror image of the Taliban, both of which insult and deny their Gods.”

Hang on a moment. It is perfectly true that one of America's most overtly religious presidents of recent times has been re-elected with an increased majority. It is also true that 13 states this year passed state referendums banning gay marriage—in most cases by larger majorities than Mr Bush managed—and that a plurality of American voters put “moral values” at the top of their list of concerns.

A moral majority? Not really

But they hardly formed a moral majority. Look at the figures: the moralists' share of the electorate was only 22%, just two points more than the share of those who cited the economy, and three points more than those who nominated terrorism as the top priority. A few points difference (and the exit polls are, after all, not entirely reliable) and everyone would have been saying the election was about jobs or Iraq.

Moreover, that 22% share is much lower than it was in the two previous presidential elections, in 2000 and 1996. Then, 35% and 40%, respectively, put moral or ethical issues top, and a further 14% and 9% put abortion first, an option that was not given in 2004. Thus, in those two elections, about half the electorate said they voted on moral matters; this time, only a fifth did.

Of course, in those previous elections there was no war on terrorism, nor had there just been a recession. So one could argue that it was remarkable that even a fifth of voters were still concerned about moral matters when so many other big issues were at stake. Maybe, but all that this means is that the war on terrorism has not fundamentally altered, or made irrelevant, the cultural, moral and religious divisions that have polarised America for so long.

A church-going land

It is also important to judge the religious-moral vote against the background of American religiosity in general. America is traditionally much more religious than any European country, with 80% of Americans saying they believe in God and 60% agreeing that “religion plays an important part in my life”.

What may be changing is that the country is getting a little more intense in its religious beliefs. Also, and this could be more important, it is becoming more willing to tolerate religious involvement in the public sphere. A study by the Pew Research Centre reported that the number of those who “agree strongly” with core items of Christian dogma rose substantially between 1965 and 2003. So did the number of those who believe that there are clear guidelines about good and evil, and that these guidelines apply regardless of circumstances. Gallup polls in the 1960s found that over half of all Americans thought that churches should not be involved in politics. Now, over half think that they can be.

At the same time, alongside all these signs of more intense religiosity, there are indications of mellowing and tolerance. Support for interracial dating has virtually doubled since 1987; discrimination against people with HIV/AIDS has become socially unacceptable; tolerance for gays in public life has risen by half—though gay marriage is still seen as a totally different matter. Americans may be holding tenaciously to a strict view of personal morality, but they say that they do not want to impose their views on others (abortion seems to be the big exception).

The fact that there was a substantial religious-moral vote is not by itself evidence of a political breakthrough by religious conservatives. Nor is it necessarily a sign of growing intolerance. The real question is whether there was anything new about what happened last week that might pave the way for such things to happen in the future. The answer is yes, though not quite in the way you might expect.

In 2000, 15m evangelical Protestants voted. They accounted for 23% of the electorate, and 71% of them voted for Mr Bush. This time, estimates Luis Lugo, the director of the Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life, they again accounted for about 23% of the electorate—which means that evangelicals did not increase their share of the vote. But overall turnout was much higher, and 78% of the evangelicals who voted, voted for Mr Bush. That works out at roughly 3.5m extra votes for him. Mr Bush's total vote rose by 9m (from 50.5m in 2000 to 59.5m), so evangelical Protestants alone accounted for more than a third of his increased vote.

In close association

Thus, the election revealed that though the evangelical share of the electorate has not increased, evangelicals have become much more important to the Republican Party. According to a study for the Pew Forum by John Green of the University of Akron, Ohio, the proportion of evangelicals calling themselves Republicans has risen from 48% to 56% over the past 12 years, making them among the most solid segments of the party's base.

This close association between party and evangelicals took a lock-step forward during the campaign. Mr Bush's chief policy adviser and campaign chairman held weekly telephone conversations with prominent evangelical Christians, such as Jim Dobson, the head of Focus on the Family, and the Rev Richard Land of the Southern Baptist Convention. Ralph Reed, formerly the executive director of the Christian Coalition, became the campaign's regional co-ordinator for the south-east—a move that encapsulates the integration of evangelical voters into the party.

Hitherto, evangelical Protestants have been the objects of Republican outreach. This time, they took the initiative themselves, asking for and distributing voter registration cards and collecting the signatures required to put anti-gay-marriage initiatives on the ballot. As the church organisers tell it, the Republican Party was left playing catch-up.

A leaderless lot

The campaign also revealed how decentralised the evangelical movement is. There are respected figures, of course, such as Mr Dobson, and there are self-appointed prophets, such as Pat Robertson. But these people have no official institutional standing, and only limited moral authority. The evangelical involvement in politics was largely the product of grass-roots organising and bottom-up effort. As we will see, this could have implications for how much of their agenda is adopted in practice.

Remember, too, that the religious right and religious America are far from being the same things; Mr Bush's moral majority depended on the votes of other religious groups as well. Catholics, with 27% of voters, are more numerous than evangelicals, and, unusually this year, the Republican candidate won a majority of the Catholic vote (52% against 47%).

Though Mr Bush did especially well among white Catholics and those who attended Mass regularly, he also increased his share of the Hispanic Catholic vote from 31% in 2000 to 42%. This alone accounts for the inroads he made into the Hispanic vote, which has traditionally gone to Democrats by two to one. In all, calculates Mr Lugo, 3.5m more Catholics voted for Mr Bush in 2004 than in 2000. Thus, they were as important to his increased majority as evangelical Protestants were.

In God's country

Public opinion by religious affiliation, %*

	Evangelical Protestants			Mainline Protestants			Latino Protestants	Black Protestants	Catholics			Latino Catholics
	Traditionalist	Centrist	Modernist	Traditionalist	Centrist	Modernist			Traditionalist	Centrist	Modernist	
Religion is important to political thinking	81	41	21	56	29	15	51	57	50	22	12	40
Organised religious groups should stay out of politics	25	43	53	35	49	61	40	35	38	53	64	40
Government should help the disadvantaged	52	57	62	56	47	55	65	60	52	59	53	60
US should support Israel over the Palestinians	64	45	28	43	34	22	37	24	43	30	23	25
Fighting AIDS abroad should be a high priority	53	61	68	61	61	68	76	81	59	60	72	77
Favour traditional marriage†	89	67	42	72	44	29	71	72	71	52	20	52
Support gay rights	36	50	63	44	62	73	47	40	51	39	83	61

Source: Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life *March-May 2004 †Question asked in relation to civil unions and same-sex marriage

This points to another new development. The election seems to have consolidated the tendency of the most observant members of any church, regardless of denomination, to vote Republican. During the campaign, a debate erupted among Catholics over John Kerry's support for abortion rights. Orthodox Catholics condemned his stance and one bishop even said he would deny the candidate communion (as a Catholic himself, Mr Kerry opposed abortion, but did not back anti-abortion laws). “Progressive” Catholics defended him, but the election returns suggest that the orthodox position won out. That seems characteristic of all denominations.

Mr Green subdivides each church into three groups (see table): traditionalists, centrists and modernists, according to the intensity of belief. Traditionalists believe in church doctrine and go to church once a week or more; modernists are more relaxed. The three most Republican groups are traditionalist evangelicals, traditionalist mainline Protestants and traditionalist Catholics. Modernists lean towards the Democrats.

The election returns are consistent with this: people who go to church once a week or more voted for Mr Bush by nearly two to one. This seems to supersede the historical pattern, whereby evangelicals have tended to vote Republican, Catholics Democratic and mainline Protestants (Lutherans, Methodists) have split their vote.

The implication of these findings is that Mr Bush's moral majority is not, as is often thought, just a bunch of right-wing evangelical Christians. Rather, it consists of traditionalist and observant church-goers of every kind: Catholic and mainline Protestant, as well as evangelicals, Mormons, Sign Followers, you name it. Meanwhile, modernist evangelicals (yes, there are a few) tend to be Democratic.

What happens next?

The big question for the next four years is what the traditionalist constituency will demand of Mr Bush, and whether he will give it what it wants.

Already, self-appointed church leaders are queuing up to claim credit for the election victory and to insist on a bigger role in government. Mr Dobson told ABC's “This Week” programme that “this president has two years, or more broadly the Republican Party has two years, to implement those policies, or certainly four, or I believe they'll pay a price in the next election.”

There is no shortage of politicians, holding some of the more extreme views of the Christian right, who can be counted on to back the church leaders to the hilt. Tom Coburn, the new senator from Oklahoma, has called not just for outlawing abortion but for the death penalty for

doctors who break such a law. Another new senator, John Thune of South Dakota, is a creationist. A third, Jim DeMint of South Carolina, has said single mothers should not teach in schools. Evangelicals are already bringing test cases to ensure that school textbooks include creationism and censor gay marriage.

Such local efforts have been common for years. What now matter are the country-wide political views of Mr Bush's traditionalist constituency. On the face of it, these Bush-leaning traditionalists come from central casting: conservative politically, rigid religiously, willing to mix up church and state. According to Mr Green's survey, nine out of ten of them say that the president should have strong religious beliefs, and two-thirds of them also believe that religious groups should involve themselves in politics.

Yet the picture is more complicated than this makes it sound. For instance, in all the religious groups substantial majorities agree that the disadvantaged need government help “to obtain their rightful place in America”.

All favour increasing anti-poverty programmes, even if it means higher taxes. All support stricter environmental regulation. Large majorities say that America should give a high priority to fighting HIV/AIDS abroad. Religious conservatives have been among the strongest backers of intervening in Sudan and increasing AIDS spending in poor countries. If the Bush administration wanted to, it could find plenty of religious support for increased welfare programmes, tougher environmental standards and more foreign aid.

The differences between the religious groups are equally striking. The Protestant traditionalists favour less government spending. But all the Catholics—traditionalist, mainline and modernist alike—favour more.

Traditionalist evangelicals are usually the odd men out. Fully 81% of them say that religion is important to their political thinking—far more than any other group. They are the only ones to rate cultural issues as more important than economic or foreign-policy ones. They are the most opposed to abortion (though 52% say it should be legal in some circumstances) and the most opposed to gay marriage (though 36% say they support gay rights). They also hold highly distinctive foreign-policy views: seven in ten say America has a special role in the world and two-thirds think America should support Israel in its conflict with the Palestinians.

He need not be trapped

Will the new importance of the traditionalist evangelical vote succeed in driving the president in the direction that many of these voters want? Not necessarily. The variety of conservative religious opinion means that Mr Bush need not be trapped by one important wing of his religious base, even if he will certainly not want to neglect it.

For example, the evangelicals' Zionist views are offset by the more even-handed positions of Catholics and mainline Protestants, implying that the president could try to restart the Middle East peace process without risking the wrath of his whole religious constituency. And because the evangelical churches are decentralised, and somewhat leaderless at the national level, it will be hard for any populist to mobilise them against a president they like and respect.

Attempts to ram conservative social policies into law look inevitable. They include the federal amendment banning gay marriage, though this is an uphill struggle that failed by 19 votes in the Senate last time round. Moreover, on the eve of the election, Mr Bush came out in favour of civil unions, which more than half the population, including many religious conservatives, favour. They also include extending a ban on “partial-birth abortion” to cover all third-trimester abortions, and, most important, appointing conservative judges to any Supreme Court vacancies.

This week there was a sign of what may be to come when Republicans threatened to strip Senator Arlen Specter of the chairmanship of the committee that oversees Supreme Court nominations after he said that staunch opponents of abortion were unlikely to be confirmed.

For opponents of Mr Bush, and also for many socially liberal Republicans, the election results and the trumpeted evangelical ambitions point to a big reversal: the victory of aggressive social conservatism over the small-government tradition in which morality is not legislated. It could, indeed, turn out to be something like this, but it need not. The wide variety of different opinions held by Mr Bush's religious supporters give the president, and his new administration, a lot of leeway, if they choose to look for it.