

CAPITAL COMMENTARY

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Moral Issues, Divided Society, and the Elections

Following Senator Kerry's defeat November 2, Boston radio pundits struck an unusual note of contrition amidst the usual search for scapegoats. Liberals, they argued, must stop trashing Evangelicals and try to understand faith commitment and its political expression. As long as Democrats remain elitist, arrogant and out of touch, the party invites electoral oblivion. Perhaps liberals should say that they, too, have religious motives because they want to help people.

All of a sudden moral values are the talk of the nation. Muted at the Republican National Convention, barely mentioned in campaign coverage by national media, moral values crystallized in some eleven state ballot measures defining marriage as the union of one man and one woman. All of these measures passed, most by enormous majorities.

In Ohio the prodigious turnout of Evangelical voters may have sent President Bush back to the White House. And his popular vote margin gave him a clear mandate to govern, while the sizable Republican majority in the Senate gave him greater freedom to make conservative appointments to the Supreme Court.

Issues of moral significance resonate broadly across America, so, when the traditional deference to state marriage law risked being overridden by the framing of homosexual "marriage" as a federal civil rights question, the available recourse was to state ballot initiatives. Thus it was that moral values, not Iraq, terrorism or the economy, became the most important concern to voters on election day.

The results were striking. Republicans enhanced their control of Congress. The G.O.P. is now an even more Southern, evangelical, and conservative party than before. The small percentage of moderate Republicans shrank. The blue states became more uniformly blue, the red states more uniformly red.

How may divided societies reconcile their political differences? There are, perhaps, two major means. The political system can be reformed to guarantee just

representation and power sharing, and the respective communities can recognize their own limitations.

Neither political leaders nor the electorate appear willing to reform the electoral system in the short term. The one attempt to do so, Colorado's initiative to distribute electoral votes proportionally, was easily defeated.

As for confronting their own limitations, Democrats may need little urging. For despite unprecedented unity, strong organization, and an able candidate, the party suffered a clear defeat in the popular vote. Will Democrats be willing to ask the hard questions, however? Will they ask how the party reconciles responsible environmental stewardship with reckless individualism on marriage and life issues? Will they question why liberalism should be the foe rather than the friend of faith-based social services or of parents' primary responsibility for their children's education?

Self-reflection is also long overdue among evangelical Christians who now enjoy unprecedented influence in Republican ranks. Despite their strong defense of a biblical view of marriage, many are unreconstructed individualists who equate stewardship of the environment with liberal elitism and believe that unilateralism in foreign policy is justified because America is God's chosen nation.

It is a Christian axiom that all communities, institutions, and persons are broken, reflecting the sinfulness of humanity. But communities, institutions and persons can, by the grace of God, experience transformation. The conditions for such transformation are humility, repentance and forgiveness. In the end, political humiliation rather than political triumph may make for easier transit through this particular needle's eye.

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