

More Than Issues, Candidates Hurt Democratic Presidential Ambitions In 2000, 2004

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It's the candidate, stupid. A new book analyzing the 2000 and 2004 presidential elections in the United States provides some of the clearest evidence to date about why George W. Bush captured the White House and the Democratic candidates failed.

While Bill Clinton's campaign in 1992 famously used the phrase "It's the economy, stupid" to highlight what they thought was the biggest issue in that campaign, the biggest issue in the 2000 and 2004 campaigns may have been the candidates themselves, said Herb Weisberg, professor of political science at Ohio State University.

"One of the bigger surprises we found is that the Democratic candidates in 2000 and 2004 both hurt their party's chances and actually drove some voters to Bush," Weisberg said.

"The parties were evenly matched during those elections in terms of many other factors, but the candidates themselves made the difference."

The choice of candidates may be the key in 2008, as well, Weisberg said.

Overall, Weisberg said "Republicans have generally done better in choosing presidential candidates that the public likes in recent years, and that has been their saving grace."

Weisberg is co-author of the new book *The American Voter Revisited* (University of Michigan Press, 2008). Weisberg wrote the book with three other professor of political science: Michael Lewis-Beck, University of Iowa; William Jacoby, Michigan State University; and Helmut Norpoth, Stony Brook University.

The book is essentially a replication of *The American Voter*, a book published in 1960 about the 1952 and 1956 elections. That original book has become a classic in political science and is generally recognized for establishing the field of voting behavior research, Weisberg said.

The original book was the first attempt to do a large-scale, national survey of voter attitudes and behavior, Weisberg said.

The new book for the most part follows the same research procedures and even the same chapter structure as the original. The new authors wanted to see if the conclusions of the original book stood the test of time.

Both books are based on the National Election Studies, a face-to-face interview run by the University of Michigan with about 1,500 Americans before and after each election.

While a lot has changed in the nearly 50 years since the original book was published, Weisberg said the new research team found that voters were remarkably unchanged.

“What we were most struck by were the similarities between voters in the 50s and today,” he said. “Details differ, but the basic model of how Americans choose a president holds up pretty well today.”

Most people today, just as in the 1950s, still vote primarily on the basis of their political party – Republican or Democrat, results showed.

However, the gap between the number of people identifying themselves as Republicans or Democrats had narrowed dramatically since the 1950s, meaning that short-term issues and candidate attractiveness can swing an election, according to Weisberg.

For example, in 1952 the Democrats had a 17-percentage point lead in party identification, including people who said they leaned toward one party or another. In 2004, the lead had dropped to just 2 percentage points.

In the meantime, the percentage of people identifying themselves as pure independents has risen slightly to 10 percent in 2004 from 6 percent in 1952.

The researchers also found evidence that confirms what many pundits have claimed: Americans are becoming more polarized about politics. Back in 1956, there was some chance of strong partisans voting for the other party and a substantial chance of weak partisans doing so (especially weak Democrats). That was no longer the case in 2004.

Another sign of growing polarization is the growth in the number of ideologues – people who vote on the basis of specific issues. In 1956, only about 11 percent of those surveyed voted primarily on the basis of some ideology, but that increased to about 20 percent in 2000.

Still, Weisberg said, that means the vast majority of voters still aren't caught up in the issues that obsess political junkies.

“In terms of really thinking deeply about ideology and issues, most people think they have better things to do with their lives,” he said.

“Political elites put a lot of importance on conservative or liberal viewpoints, but for the general public, that's not necessarily how they

organize their thoughts.”

With the shrinking of the Democratic majority and these other changes in the past 50 years, elections are more competitive than ever, Weisberg said. That increases the importance of short-term issues – such as scandals -- and the appeal of the candidates themselves in determining who captures the presidency.

And it is the candidates who have failed the Democratic Party in the past two elections, he said. That could be seen when the researchers counted the number of favorable and unfavorable references that study participants made about the candidates.

Those results showed that both Democratic candidates -- Al Gore and John Kerry -- were viewed less favorably, on balance, than was Bush among the total sample. The contrast is especially stark in 2004, where negative comments about Kerry outnumbered positive ones by nearly 50 percent.

“Even more than the issues, the candidates themselves may be where the Republicans held the biggest advantage in the last two elections,” he said.

While it is impossible to predict, it is easy to see how the 2008 election may end up being very similar to the last two elections, with voter evaluations of the candidates themselves being vital.

“Many of the issues of the day, such as the economy and the war in Iraq, seem to favor the Democrats,” Weisberg said.

“But we are still left with the candidate factor. As of right now, John McCain seems to be viewed favorably by much of the public. The question is how the Democrat nominee will be defined. That’s the battle,” he said.

Source: Ohio State University

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