

# After the US elections: the Democratic leadership bows to the far right

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The Democratic Party establishment's response to the 2004 presidential and congressional election results is to shift even further to the right, seeking greater collaboration with the Bush administration, while trying to curry favor with the religious right.

Former president Bill Clinton set the tone with his November 5 speech to the Urban Land Institute in upstate New York. The election presents a great opportunity for President Bush and a great opportunity for Democrats, and the two are not necessarily in conflict, he declared.

Echoing the conventional wisdom that Christian evangelical voters played the decisive role in the election, Clinton said the Democrats had failed to effectively rebut the Republican Party "values" campaign. "If we let people believe that our party doesn't believe in faith and family, doesn't believe in work and freedom, that's our fault," he said.

He said Democrats had made the mistake of "not engaging the Christian evangelical community in a serious discussion of what it would take to promote a real culture of life." The phrase "culture of life" is a political code, employed by the Christian fundamentalist groups and the Catholic Church hierarchy—and embraced by the Bush campaign—to describe opposition to abortion and stem cell research. The claim to value human life is highly one-sided, however, since it is combined with enthusiastic support for capital punishment and for the imperialist war in Iraq.

Senate Democrats voiced similar concerns. Senator Christopher Dodd of Connecticut declared, "We were on the right side of the issues, but we lost our ability to connect to people on values. We have to get that back." Senator Blanche Lincoln of Arkansas said, "People are faced with so many problems, they cling to faith and prayers. I don't hesitate to stand up in a crowd and express how important faith is in my life. It is important to be able to express that in a way that is believable, and Democrats have to get comfortable doing that."

Former Clinton White House chief of staff Leon Panetta drew more overt political conclusions, telling the *Washington Post* that Democrats "have to take the time to understand the concerns of rural families and Christian families."

By this, he meant not addressing the enormous social and economic problems of rural America, but adapting to religious prejudices and the glorification of militarism. "We cannot ignore the swath of red states across the South and Midwest," Panetta said. "The party of FDR has become the party of Michael Moore and 'Fahrenheit 9/11,' and it does not help us in big parts of the country."

Perhaps the most openly reactionary declaration came from Senator John Breaux of Louisiana, who retired this year to become a multi-million-dollar Washington lobbyist, leaving his seat to be captured by

the Republicans. "Any time a party does better with non-church-going people than with church-going people, you've got a problem," he told the *Post*. "That is why we've lost across the South."

The logic of that comment is that the Democrats must not only match the Republicans in appealing to Christian fundamentalists and other religious zealots, but that the Democratic Party should distance itself from the secular or only casually religious voters who comprise more than half the American population.

Senate Democrats demonstrated their desire to collaborate with the Bush administration in deeds as well as words, coalescing quickly behind Senator Harry Reid of Nevada as the new Minority Leader, replacing Tom Daschle, who was defeated for reelection in South Dakota. Reid, formerly the Minority Whip, the second-ranking Democrat in the Senate, is an even less combative figure than Daschle.

Reid is also more politically conservative than Daschle. He is opposed to abortion rights, and shares Bush's hostility to serious enforcement of environmental laws, having lobbied repeatedly on behalf of Nevada's powerful mining interests. Like the Democratic presidential and vice-presidential candidates, Kerry and Edwards, Reid voted in the Senate in October 2002 to authorize the war in Iraq.

None of the leading liberals with safe Senate seats challenged Reid for the leadership. Instead, they chose to leave the direction of the Senate caucus, as under Daschle, in the hands of a senator who represents a thinly populated western state with a Republican-controlled state government, who has faced repeated re-election challenges, and is therefore more susceptible to White House pressure.

Dodd, for instance, who once opposed Daschle for the Democratic leadership, did not seek the leadership this year. Nor did John Kerry, who, as the defeated Democratic presidential candidate, is the party's titular leader. Kerry promised instead, with unintentional irony, to fight for his presidential agenda in the Senate with "all the passion I brought to the campaign."

Liberal Senator Richard Durbin of Illinois announced that he would seek Reid's former position as Minority Whip. At a press conference where he claimed the support of more than enough Senate Democrats to win the position, Durbin adopted a conciliatory tone towards the White House, saying, "We have to pick our battles and we have to look for common ground with the administration when we can find it."

Pressure groups in the right wing of the Democratic Party, like the Democratic Leadership Council (DLC), issued their own declarations that the lesson of the election was to conciliate with religious conservatives. Al From, founder of the DLC, cited polls showing that more voters identify themselves as conservatives than as liberals. ""

We cannot just write off people who disagree with us,” he said. “There are more of them than us.”

With the support of several Senate Democrats, a new political faction called “Third Way” has been formed with the aim of pushing the congressional Democrats further to the right. The group includes ex-Clinton administration aides like former communications director Don Baer, former policy adviser William Galston and former Gore chief of staff Ron Klain.

The name itself is telling: it is taken from the main political slogan of British Prime Minister Tony Blair in his campaign to push the Labour Party to the right and repudiate its former reformist program. Blair adopted the substance of Margaret Thatcher’s policy of privatization and deregulation, combining it with sanctimonious—religion-tinged—rhetoric about helping the downtrodden in British society.

The effect of Blair’s policies over the last seven years has been drastic cuts in the welfare state and the further enriching of a wealthy elite, making Britain second only to the United States as the most economically polarized of the major industrialized countries. At the same time, Blair has become the main international accomplice of the Bush administration’s conquest of Iraq, and its overall foreign policy of global gangsterism.

According to the Third Way promoters in the US, the group intends to target the “moderate majority” by advocating “concrete legislative proposals” on issues like Social Security privatization and cutting spending on entitlement programs like Medicare and Medicaid, that would be “equal in scale and scope to the tectonic changes that Bush is proposing.”

One supporter, Senator Evan Bayh of Indiana, much touted in the media as a future Democratic presidential hopeful, underscored the group’s right-wing ideological bent by implicitly rebuking the congressional Democratic leadership and the Kerry-Edwards campaign as too liberal. “The answer to the ideological extremes of the right has to be more than rigid dogma from the left,” he said.

Third Way is launching a “New South” project, headed by Senator Mary Landrieu of Louisiana, the group’s vice-chairman, to examine ways to identify the Democratic Party with “cultural and value issues” exploited by the Republicans in that region. (This also reflects the consensus in the Democratic Party establishment that the next Democratic presidential candidate should be a southerner from the right wing of the party, like Clinton or Jimmy Carter.)

The political premise of this stampede to the right is that the November 2 vote revealed a huge upsurge in Christian fundamentalist sentiments, to which the Democratic Party must adapt. This upsurge was supposedly revealed in the passage of anti-gay-marriage referenda in 11 states, and in Bush’s sweep of the southern and Plains states, where evangelical sects are strongest.

Both Democratic Party officials and liberal media columnists have gone so far as to blame gay people—who have been viciously demonized by the far right—for Kerry’s defeat. *Washington Post* columnist Tina Brown, the former editor of the *New Yorker*, claimed that even prominent gays were attributing the Democratic defeat to the Massachusetts state supreme court’s decision last spring to legalize gay marriage.

Brown suggested that gay rights advocates had selfishly pursued their own interests at the cost of reelecting Bush and causing a broader deterioration in social conditions in the United States. “That was the trade-off for 45 million Americans without health care,” she wrote.

This kind of argument not only displays the crass cowardice of the

liberals in the face of anti-gay bigotry, but also grossly distorts the actual significance of the election results. There is no question that Bush benefited from a large turnout among Christian fundamentalists, just as Kerry received huge support from blacks, gays, college students and trade unionists. But there is no evidence that Bush received a significantly greater proportion of the vote from the Christian right in 2004 than he did in losing the popular vote to Al Gore in 2000—or for that matter, than Republican candidate Bob Dole received in losing by a substantial margin to Bill Clinton in 1996.

As gay rights groups have pointed out, Kerry did better than Gore in the three battleground states—Oregon, Michigan and Ohio—where anti-gay referenda were on the ballot. Bush’s percentage of the popular vote nationwide rose by 3.1 percent compared to 2000. In the 11 states with anti-gay referenda, he posted an average gain of less than 3.1 percent, while in the 39 states without referenda, his average gain was greater than 3.1 percent.

According to an analysis cited in the *Village Voice*, prepared by Hamilton College political scientist Philip Klinkner, the support of Christian fundamentalists contributed only marginally to the increase in Bush’s vote. Far more significant was intensified support for Bush from a segment of the electorate little commented on in the mass media: those with family incomes over \$100,000 a year.

The turnout from this top income bracket rose significantly—from 15 percent of the vote in 2000 to 18 percent of a much larger vote in 2004. The proportion of these high-income voters supporting Bush also increased, from 54 percent in 2000 to 58 percent in 2004. The combination of higher turnout and greater support from this social layer delivered nearly three million additional votes to Bush.

Klinkner told the *Village Voice* that Bush’s proportion of the vote rose by three percentage points in 2004, compared to 2000. “Two of those points,” he said, “came solely from people making over a 100 grand. It made me think about that scene in *Fahrenheit 9/11*, the one where Bush joked at a white-tie gala about the ‘haves’ and the ‘have-mores’: ‘Some people call you the elite,’ Bush said. ‘I call you my base.’”

Based on these figures, the major factor in the Bush election victory was not an unthinking embrace of “moral values” by working-class whites—the stereotype peddled in the media—but the selfish concern for individual accumulation on the part of those who reaped the lion’s share of Bush’s tax cut bonanza for the wealthy.

The Democratic Party is incapable of addressing the real social polarization in the United States—that between the wealthy elite and everyone else—because it stands on the same side of that social divide as the Republican Party. A genuine alternative to the reactionary politics of the Bush administration can only emerge from a mobilization from below, through the building of an independent mass political movement of working people directed against the profit system.



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