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Election Day 2004: What's at Stake, and What's Not

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Even as the polls open this morning, it is now clear that this is what political scientists call a "turnout election," an election decided simply on the basis of who gets out to vote, and who does not. Activists and organizers for both parties have been hard at work establishing a "ground plan" for maximizing voter turnout. At the end of the day, we will know which party—and which worldview—motivated a greater number of citizens to vote. Therefore, this election represents more than a national decision about leadership; it represents a national choice of direction for the future.

At this point, most informed observers expect the election to be very close, at least in terms of the popular vote. Throughout this campaign, both sides have acknowledged a basic divide in the American electorate, and both candidates have worked hard to establish credibility with the base of his political support. The so-called "swing vote," which has played a major part in American elections throughout most of the twentieth century, has now been reduced to such a small electoral margin that neither party can afford to give paramount attention to such voters who are essentially immune to the basic motivations of the party's base.

Even as the media commentators, reporters, analysts, and various talking heads prepare for untold hours of play-by-play analysis, this day provides a unique opportunity for taking stock of what is at stake in this election—and what is not.

In the first place, this election draws attention to the basic divide that now separates Americans along ideological and worldview lines. Though this basic division has been building over the last half-century, the nation has now reached the point that two opposing views of the world are now held by citizens who look across an apparently unbridgeable chasm of ideological distance. This ideological divide emerged shortly after the end of World War II, when competing views of the Cold War conflict began to separate a liberal elite from the mainstream of the society. Though this distancing was largely hidden from public view during the Eisenhower years, it came to light in the 1960s through a series of conflicts that ended, most tragically, in the nation's angst over the war in Vietnam.

That same decade saw the emergence of an alternative youth culture, a continuing alienation of the academic elite from the general population, and the emergence of various liberation movements that would eventually transform the entire society. The tumultuous and revolutionary years of the 1960s produced radical cultural swings which continued into the early 1970s. With the *Roe v. Wade* decision legalizing abortion, the ideological conflicts during the Watergate crisis, a fractious debate over the failed Equal Rights Amendment, President Carter's declaration of amnesty to draft dodgers from the Vietnam War, and various other events, Americans finally awakened to the radically altered state of the society around them.

In the near background to all of this stood the sexual revolution, a massive transformation of morality propelled by the development of “The Pill” and symbolized by the “free love” movement of Hippie culture. The sexual revolution reached far beyond the hippies, however, and right into the heart of many American families. On top of this, the new availability of “no fault” divorce placed the family, marriage, and sexual order on the altar of personal convenience and unrestrained sexual desire.

This same era saw the radical expansion of government, with the development of a highly bureaucratized culture that allowed government to reach within the private domains of American institutions and the nation’s families—altering everything from the economy to the educational system and even parenthood. The regulatory state, along with its apparatus of investigation and enforcement, radically altered the relationship of individuals to institutions and, eventually, even the relationship of children and parents.

These developments represent both cause and evidence of the ideological divides that were woven throughout the fabric of American society—leading to the weakening of the fabric itself. Looking at these developments from a liberal/conservative analysis, the Left viewed most of these developments with enthusiasm, championing the various movements of liberation as freedom from oppression and an outdated morality. Identified by scholars such as Paul Hollander as “the adversary culture,” the Left increasingly saw the family as inherently repressive and saw Christian sexual morality as intolerant, limiting, and oppressively negative. For some on the Left, the family was redefined as any negotiated form of kinship, and the civil society became the arena for pushing these various liberationist themes to their ultimate conclusions. The issue of abortion was transformed into an absolute essential for the liberation of women, for whom pregnancy was a mark of inequality, obligation, and limitation.

Eventually, the Left would divide into a constellation of special interest groups, united most significantly in a common repudiation of traditional forms and norms. At the level of the academic and cultural elite, this was represented by an ideological commitment to postmodernism and a constructivist understanding of truth. At other levels, the Left simply took refuge in the argument that limiting personal freedom—especially in the arena of human sexuality—was inherently negative, repressive, and wrong.

In order to effect radical social change, the Left became frustrated and disillusioned with the political process as represented by the legislatures and turned increasingly to the courts, where a cadre of activist judges stood ready to turn the judiciary into a second legislative branch—but a branch immune to the wrath of the electorate.

On the Right, conservatives were slower to recognize the depth of the ideological divide and the massive amount of cultural ground they had already lost. Though the debates over abortion and the Equal Rights Amendment awakened some sectors of the electorate, political conservatism did not emerge as a major force in the American political system until the election of President Ronald Reagan in 1980. By that time, the culture had moved so far to the left that classical Christianity, represented by adherence to the orthodox doctrines of the faith, was now dismissed by the cultural elites as “fundamentalism,” and organized efforts to overturn abortion and reverse liberal social trends were described as evidence of the emergence of a “radical Right.”

Among conservatives, the issues of abortion, homosexuality, marriage, and education were evidence of deeper concerns over authority, order, and respect for the law and democratic institutions. What the Left saw as liberation, conservatives recognized as anarchy and rebellion.

Now, with issues like same-sex marriage and embryonic stem-cell research on the front line of our national debate, we can see that the ideological divides of the 1980s were only a foretaste of what was to come.

Clearly, issues as basic as the sanctity of human life and the integrity of marriage are at stake in today’s election. With one presidential candidate [Senator John Kerry] bragging of being the most pro-homosexual candidate in the nation’s history, and the other candidate [President George W. Bush] pledging to support a Federal Marriage Amendment, the choice is clear. Similarly, Senator Kerry has made his advocacy of embryonic stem-cell research a centerpiece of his campaign, pledging to put American tax dollars into the business of creating and destroying human embryos in the name of medical research. President George W. Bush, on the other hand, stands by the policy he established in August of 2001, which prevents any further destruction of human embryos through taxpayer-supported research. Once again, the choice is clear. Taking into account also the war in Iraq, the war on terror, and fundamental questions about the nation’s foreign policy, it seems safe to conclude that the stakes could hardly be higher.

Yet at the same time, Christians must be careful to maintain biblical sanity in the midst of political confusion. Guided by a biblical perspective, we may well be the last people on earth who know that the political process is genuinely important, but not ultimate.

The future of the United States of America is, in a very real sense, at stake in political decisions. Nevertheless, the Kingdom of God is not subject to the electoral process, and transcends any earthly reality.

As Christians, we are first and foremost citizens of Heaven, who are nonetheless also commissioned by God to be responsible citizens of this earthly kingdom so long as we live in this age. We must make responsible choices, engage the political arena with courage and clarity, and in the end, rest secure in the knowledge that though the United States of America may be the world's only superpower, it will one day join every other empire in the dustbin of history.

Nevertheless, the Kingdom of God is eternal, and its citizenship is determined not on the basis of birth or nationality, but on the basis of the second birth and the gift of faith.

This much is clear: The church of the Lord Jesus Christ remains the most important institution on earth—a visible representation of the invisible kingdom to which all believers in Christ belong. The lordship of Christ is not on the ballot today, nor is the Kingdom of Heaven. This is indeed an important day of decision, but our Christian responsibility is not decided by the political process.

Oddly enough, at the end of this day we may or may not know who will be the next President of the United States. But we do know who is the Lord of Heaven and earth, whose kingdom cannot be shaken, and whose rule is eternal. So, at the end of the day let it be said that we did all we could to be salt and light in this fallen world and in our beloved nation, and then let us put our confidence in the sure and certain reign of our sovereign God. Now, that's a word of analysis and perspective you're not likely to hear from the talking heads doing tonight's commentary!

