

The Reagan Coalition Meets the Twenty-First Century

John Kenneth White

Professor of Politics and Director of the Life Cycle Institute

Catholic University of America

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Note: Editors May Quote from this Report Freely.

Twenty-five years ago back in 1979, the Reagan coalition was emerging as a powerful and potent force. Signs of its birth were already apparent in the 1978 midterm elections when Republicans added sixteen seats in the House and three in the Senate. Jimmy Carter—a Democrat who had been elected president in 1976 thanks to the Watergate scandal—was proving to be an ineffectual leader. While Carter had not lost his capacity for truth-telling, Americans wanted something more. In 1978, 70 percent believed “the government cannot be regularly trusted to do what is right;” 74 percent said “government is run for a few big interests;” and 79 percent thought “government wastes a lot of tax dollars.”¹ Republicans took advantage of this hostility by advocating the “Kemp-Roth” tax plan—a massive cut in federal taxes they claimed would *add* revenues to the federal coffers. Republicans were thinking anew and, in Abraham Lincoln’s phrase, were “disenthraling themselves” from their long-standing balance-the-budget dogma. Supply-side economics was becoming an important chapter in the new Republican gospel.

Republican rethinking about government was cheered by a disillusioned electorate. By 1979, a majority began to seriously question whether the present was better than their past and, more ominously, whether the future would hold the promise of better days ahead.² A majority also came to believe that “important national problems such as energy shortages, inflation, and crime could not be solved through traditional American politics.”³ And this was *before* the Iranian hostage crisis sharpened the image of Jimmy Carter as a tepid commander-in-chief with a country was seriously off on the wrong track.

American dismay with life outside their homes was coupled by a sense that

something was amiss inside them as well. Ronald Reagan's pollster, Richard Wirthlin, found 68 percent agreed with the statement that "families are weaker now than they were several years ago." Of these, 45 percent blamed a lowering of parental standards and widespread permissiveness; another 31 percent said cited two-parent working families.⁴ Other data compiled by Wirthlin found a widespread sense of personal anomie:

- ☐ Two of three Americans agreed that "everything changes so quickly these days that I often have trouble deciding which are the right rules to follow."
- ☐ A majority believed we were "better off in the old days when everyone knew just how they were expected to act."
- ☐ Seventy-one percent felt "many things our parents stood for are going to ruin right before our eyes."
- ☐ Nearly eight-in-ten believed "what is lacking in the world today is the old kind of friendship that lasted for a lifetime."
- ☐ One-in-two said they felt "left out of things going on around me."⁵

Enter Ronald Reagan. In many ways, Reagan was the quintessential man of the 1950s. He resembled the spiffily dressed salesmen of that era: nice pressed suit, perfectly knotted tie, a white handkerchief in the breast pocket, and shoes spit-polished and shined to reflect his sunny optimism. Reagan had a certain "father knows best" quality, and his personality seemed drawn from the popular father figures of television's golden age: Ozzie Nelson (*The Adventures of Ozzie and Harriet*), Ward Cleaver (*Leave It to Beaver*), and Jim Anderson (*Father Knows Best*). Pollster Wirthlin found that Reagan's authoritative, father-like persona appealed to voters. In particular, Reagan supporters

regretted the loss of deeply-cherished values, especially those associated with the business ethic of hard work and high yield. Those with a higher sense of service to country, a lower support of the welfare state, a greater desire to decrease the role of government, and a lower sense of pacifism, strongly favored Reagan over Carter.⁶

Thus, Ronald Reagan and his campaign team launched what became known as the “strategy of values.”⁷ Reagan proclaimed his party was “ready to build a new consensus with all those across the land who share a community of values embodied in these words: family, work, neighborhood, peace, and freedom.”⁸ From these values sprang others that formed the centrality of Reagan’s appeal: self-esteem, patriotism, self-realization, and religiosity. This “values strategy” had two objectives: (1) securing Reagan’s victories in 1980 and 1984, and (2) establishing a framework for governance. Accomplishing these objectives would not be easy. A June 1980 Wirthlin poll found 51 percent of voters called themselves Democrats, 30 percent were Republicans, and 19 percent were independents.⁹ To win, Reagan would have to get overwhelming Republican support, attract large numbers of independents, and procure a substantial number of Democrats. Wirthlin warned that unseating Carter “will be extremely difficult, even unlikely.”¹⁰

Despite the odds, the values strategy worked. Reagan won and in so doing assembled a new coalition that included southern whites, blue-collar ethnics, born-again Christians, Roman Catholics, and westerners. Of these, southern whites, blue-collar, and Catholics once formed the backbone of the Democratic New Deal-era majority built by Franklin D. Roosevelt. All were won over by Reagan’s anti-government message. For years, Reagan had preached a message of government restraint. In 1976, for example, he warned: “Thousands of towns and neighborhoods have seen their peace

disturbed by bureaucrats and social planners through busing, questionable education programs, and attacks on family unity.”¹¹ Four years later, Reagan made the same anti-government criticisms: “Government has grown too wasteful, too unresponsive, too uncaring to people and their problems.”¹² As president, Reagan’s message did not waver. In his 1981 Inaugural Address, he famously declared: “Government is not the solution to our problems. Government is the problem.”¹³ Speaking before a joint session of Congress during his frenetic first-hundred days in office, Reagan told legislators, “We can no longer afford things simply because we think of them.”¹⁴ Reagan wanted government programs replaced by initiatives from religious groups, community and professional organizations, and volunteer groups. In Reagan’s view, these “mediating institutions” had been supplanted by “puzzle palaces on the Potomac” that were engaged in an ongoing assault on prevailing local community values.

The Reagan Revolution resulted in a wholesale shift in public thinking. In 1936, at the height of the New Deal, pollster George Gallup found 56 percent favoring a concentration of power in the federal government; 44 percent wanted authority centered in the states.¹⁵ By 1981, the figures were reversed: 64 percent wanted power concentrated in the state governments; 36 percent preferred more federal control.¹⁶

Anti-communism was another key ingredient of Ronald Reagan’s appeal. Throughout his acting and political careers, Reagan professed a profound antipathy toward communism. As he once told an interviewer: “Coming out of the cage of the Army [after World War II]. . . a series of hard-nosed happenings began to change my whole view of American dangers. Most of them tied in directly with my own bailiwick of acting. . . . From being an active (though unconscious) partisan in what now and then

turned out to be communist causes, I little by little became disillusioned or perhaps, in my case, I should say reawakened.”¹⁷ By 1964, this former Democrat-turned-Republican was on the mashed potato circuit campaigning for Barry Goldwater. Reagan used as his text a talk he had given for years to employees of General Electric, sponsor of the television program he hosted, *Death Valley Days*. In it, he railed against communists and Democrats, whom he believed were too supine in the face of the Soviet threat: “The specter our well-meaning liberal friends refuse to face is that their policy of accommodation is appeasement, and appeasement does not give you a choice between peace and war, only between fight and surrender.”¹⁸

In his never-give-up fight against communism, Reagan stressed the importance of Judeo-Christian values to combat it. He told television interviewer David Frost in 1968 that Jesus Christ was the historical figure he most admired.¹⁹ Eight years later, while challenging Gerald R. Ford for the Republican presidential nomination, Reagan inserted a section into the Republican platform titled “Morality in Foreign Policy,” which read: “Honestly, openly, and with firm conviction, we shall go forward as a united people to forge a lasting peace in the world based upon our deep belief in the rights of man, the rule of law, and guidance by the hand of God.”²⁰ In a memorable 1983 address, Reagan damned the Soviet Union as an “evil empire,” saying it was “the focus of evil in the modern world.”²¹

Reagan’s words resonated: in 1983, 73 percent said that the “real problem with communism is that it threatens our religious and moral values.”²² Christian fundamentalists vigorously agreed with these sentiments and became strong Reagan backers. In 1980, the Moral Majority bought newspaper advertisements that read: “We

cannot afford to be number two in defense! But, sadly enough, that's where we are today. Number two. And fading!"²³ Reagan received 61 percent support from white evangelicals that year; in 1984, that figure increased to 81 percent. George H. W. Bush got 81 percent of the born-again vote in 1988, and a less impressive (but still substantial) 61 percent backing in his failed 1992 reelection effort.

Catholics, too, were inspired by Reagan's anticommunist rhetoric. For decades, the Roman Catholic hierarchy had likened communism to self-avowed atheism. In 1978, that struggle culminated with the election of the Cardinal of Krakow, Karol Jozef Wojtyla, to the papacy. Pope John Paul II had spent decades tormenting the communist regime in his native Poland. Like him, many American Catholics stood shoulder-to-shoulder with their imprisoned eastern European cousins behind the Iron Curtain. Patrick J. Buchanan, a Catholic high school student during the late 1940s, recalled one especially memorable incident:

When the Communist regime in Budapest announced in 1948 the coming trial for treason of Josef Cardinal Mindszenty, the Primate of Hungary who had resisted both the Nazis and the communists, there was enormous anguish. Cardinal Mindszenty was constantly in the prayers of the nuns and the school children, and when the newspapers displayed months later, the shocking picture of the drugged and broken prelate as he "confessed" at one of Stalin's ugliest "show trials," the Catholic world was stunned. We did not need any classroom discussion about Marxism to recognize the evil of communism; it was written all over the tortured face of the Catholic priest.²⁴

Ronald Reagan's anti-government, anti-tax, and anti-communist messages merged to

form a powerful elixir. A new coalition was being born, but how long would it last? Before Reagan took office, Richard Wirthlin advised: “Certainly, the people and the pundits will start asking whether the Reagan administration constitutes a juncture in American history when the role of the federal government was changed and a ‘new beginning’ was commenced along the lines of your approach to governance.”²⁵ The answer to Wirthlin’s question was found in the election returns. In 1980, Reagan received 51 percent of the popular vote and 489 electoral votes. By 1984, the Reagan coalition had become a political behemoth: Reagan won 59 percent of the ballots and an astounding 525 electoral votes. Four years later, George H. W. Bush became the first vice president since Martin Van Buren to ascend directly to the presidency—in essence, creating a third Reagan term. Thus, the Reagan coalition won three straight presidential victories—something that had not been done since Franklin Roosevelt’s back-to-back wins in 1932, 1936, and 1940. This was an extraordinary achievement, especially considering that Roosevelt’s third term was won thanks to the onset of World War Two.

The Reagan coalition was certainly a mixed lot. John Judis writes that it “consisted of seemingly incompatible constituencies—pro-choice suburbanites from New Jersey alongside small-town fundamentalists from Alabama, anti-communist Chinese-Americans from California alongside nativist white North Carolinians.”²⁶ As Table 1 shows, southern whites, Catholics, and high school graduates were strong Reagan-Bush backers. Other groups, including westerners, first-time voters, rural voters, and men were being added to the Republican presidential roundup. Middle-income voters, who had felt the pangs of inflation and were hostile to new taxes, also voted Republican. White Protestants, who had been in the GOP tent since the 1930s, remained so. While

Republicans and conservatives were overwhelmingly loyal, many independents and Democrats were attracted to the Republican ticket. Independents gave both Reagan and Bush solid majorities, while one-in-four Democrats voted for Reagan in 1980 and 1984, and one-in-five backed Bush in 1988.²⁷

Table 1			
The Reagan Coalition, 1980-1988 (in percentages).			
Group	Reagan Vote 1980	Reagan Vote 1984	George H. W. Bush Vote 1988
Southern whites	63	72	66
Catholics	53	61	52
White Protestants	55	67	55
Westerners	86	92	91
Rural areas	55	63	55
Republicans	73	82	80
Independents	N/A	61	51
Conservatives	51	60	50
First-time voters	55	62	57
High school graduate	59	59	56
Men	63	72	66
Income \$30,000-\$49,999	53	61	52

Source: Marjorie Connelly, "Portrait of the Electorate," *New York Times*, November 10, 1996, p. 28. Data is based upon the CBS News/*New York Times* 1980, 1984, and 1988 exit polls.

George W. Bush: Reagan's Spiritual Heir

In many respects, George W. Bush bears more of a political resemblance to Ronald Reagan than he does to his own father. Like Reagan, the younger Bush emphasizes the importance of Judeo-Christian values. For example, when asked during a presidential debate when asked to name his favorite philosopher, Bush took his GOP opponents and questioners aback when he replied, "Christ, because he changed my heart."²⁸ As president, Bush has frequently returned to religious themes. A July 4, 2001 speech in Philadelphia is typical: "Without churches and charities, many of our citizens who have lost hope would be left to their own struggles and their own fate. And as I well know, they are not the only ones whose lives can be changed and uplifted by the influence of faith in God."²⁹ This is quite unlike Bush's father who rarely invoked the Almighty, conforming to the Northeast Yankee tradition of "not wearing your religion on your sleeve."

Of course, there were differences. Unlike Reagan, Bush wanted a more active federal government in the nation's domestic life. During the 2000 campaign, he called for a initial tripling of government funding for a values-based school curricula that promoted character formation, more government money for internet filters at schools and public libraries, and government support for several faith-based programs. Bush's support for a constitutional amendment banning gay marriage and his eagerness to embrace the Christian Right's social agenda differs from Reagan who accepted the support of the Christian Right but never used his authority to advocate its social agenda. Bush, on the other hand, has established the Office of Faith-Based Initiatives in the White House, something Reagan would have probably opposed since he believed that charity

was best left in private, non-governmental hands.

Still, the similarities between Reagan and the younger Bush were remarkable. Like Reagan, Bush acknowledged during his 2000 presidential campaign that the sexual license of the go-go 1960s needed to be replaced with the traditional family values often associated with the sedate 1950s. In a speech that could have easily been given by Reagan, Bush declared:

The real problem comes, not when children challenge the rules, but when adults won't defend the rules. And for about three decades, many American schools surrendered this role. Values were "clarified," not taught. Students were given moral puzzles, not moral guidance. But morality is not a cafeteria of personal choices—with every choice equally right and equally arbitrary, like picking a flavor of ice cream. We do not shape our own morality. It is morality that shapes our lives.³⁰

By explicitly rejecting the sexual freedom during the "Make Love, Not War" era, Bush offered himself as a Reagan-like father figure—someone who, unlike the morally-deficient Bill Clinton, would set an example that complemented his values rhetoric. Thus, Bush promised to "return the highest standards of honor to the highest office in the land," saying this was "a charge I plan to keep."³¹ This promise found many takers: three-quarters thought Bush had high personal and moral standards, and 70 percent said he shared the moral values they tried to live by.³² By a five-to-one margin, Bush was viewed as having higher moral standards than Clinton, and an astounding 81 percent of Republicans cited his moral character as a "very important" reason for backing him.³³ Overall, 43 percent said they would be more likely to support Bush over Democrat Al

Gore because he would bring morality and ethics back to the White House.³⁴

Reagan and Bush's values strategies were complemented by their anti-tax messages. Like Reagan, George W. Bush had a powerful aversion to taxes. In 2001, he won quick congressional approval of a \$1.2 trillion 11-year tax cut that was more comprehensive than the infamous Reagan tax cuts of 1981. Upon signing the bill, a proud Bush declared: "Tax relief is the first achievement produced by the new tone in Washington, and it was produced in record time."³⁵ Unlike Reagan—especially during his gubernatorial years—Bush was uncompromising when it came to taxes. Undoubtedly, he recalled the difficulties his father faced after breaking his infamous "read my lips, no new taxes" pledge. For example, at an early stage in the 2001 tax debate, Bush stubbornly resisted the urge to compromise with congressional Democrats, telling White House Director of Legislative Affairs Nick Calio: "Nicky, we will not negotiate with ourselves, ever."³⁶ In 2003, Bush got a Republican-controlled Congress to pass an unprecedented second round of tax cuts totaling \$350 billion, even though he had begun a long and expensive war in Iraq.

But even as Bush was keeping his Republican base happy, the political utility of tax cuts was waning. According to a 2003 Harris poll, a mere 8 percent said they would benefit "a lot" from a tax cut; 51 percent answered "only a little;" and 34 percent said "not at all."³⁷ A *Los Angeles Times* survey found that half believed reducing the federal deficit (which had ballooned under Bush) would be the most effective method of stimulating the economy; only 37 percent believed tax cuts were more helpful.³⁸ Americans, it seemed, wanted government to balance its budgets (a message that formed the core of independent Ross Perot's third-party candidacy in 1992). At the same time,

they also wanted government to regulate the excesses of the marketplace. These included reigning in the practices that created the Enron, Arkadelphia, and other corporate scandals that became news headlines in 2002. One poll found 75 percent having less confidence in the stock market thanks to the Enron scandal; 74 percent were less confident in corporate America; 53 percent were less confident in the Republicans in Congress; and 48 percent were less confident in the Bush administration—all courtesy of Enron.³⁹

The terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, pushed the headlines of corporate greed off the front pages and gave George W. Bush and the Republicans a renewed sense of purpose. It was about time. Ever since the Cold War ended with a whimper on December 25, 1991, the day Mikhail Gorbachev gave up his post as president of the Soviet Union, Republicans had struggled in presidential politics. Nationalist Republicans—who were tough-minded warriors (“peace through strength” was their motto) and tenacious summit negotiators (Reagan’s Soviet mantra was “trust, but verify”)—received a much-needed boost. Prior to the September 11 attacks, foreign policy had receded as a factor in presidential elections. Bill Clinton had been elected twice without much public attention to foreign policy, and George W. Bush also benefitted from its absence as an issue.⁴⁰ In fact, had foreign policy been prominent in 2000, it is likely that Al Gore would have won, since his expertise was vastly more extensive than that of Texas’s governor.⁴¹ But Osama bin Laden’s brazen attacks put foreign policy uppermost among the public’s concerns. And Bush’s rhetoric kept it there. Using the earthy language of the Wild West, Bush initially declared that he wanted al Qaeda’s mastermind “dead or alive.”⁴²

But Bush did more than make Osama bin Laden the most wanted man in the world. He drew a bright line between the freedom-loving West and the Mideast terrorists. Standing before a joint session of Congress shortly after the September 11 attacks, Bush declared: “Every nation, in every region, now has a decision to make. Either you are with us, or you are with the terrorists.”⁴³ In numerous speeches, he consistently portrayed the U.S. cause as one that would enhance the values of freedom, religious tolerance, and a belief in progress, while castigating the terrorists as “evil-doers”—words reminiscent of Reagan’s infamous “evil empire” speech. As Bush ominously declared, “The terrorists’ directive commands them to kill Christians and Jews, to kill all Americans, and make no distinctions among military and civilians, including women and children.”⁴⁴

But the war on terror—important as it is—hardly compares to the Cold War. The Cold War touched nearly all nation states; it penetrated all aspects of social and economic life; it was costly; and it involved widespread public sacrifices. The war on terror involves shadowy organizations that transcend nation states; it does not involve broad-based public sacrifice (there is no draft); and it has not permeated into the social and cultural fabric. Three years after the September 11 attacks, a Zogby International poll finds only 25 percent worry about a terrorist strike on U.S. soil. Instead of worrying about terrorism, 40 percent fret about being able to pay their bills; 37 percent are concerned about an uncertain economy; 18 percent stay awake trying to find a job; and 38 percent are troubled by a deterioration of moral values.⁴⁵

While the Iraq War has consumed much of the public debate, a growing number of Americans do not see a link between it and the war on terror. By late 2003, only 46

percent saw Iraq as a major part of the war on terror; 48 percent said it was either a minor part of the war on terror or separate from it.⁴⁶ One year later, Americans were evenly split as to whether Bush's decision to invade Iraq had been a mistake: 47 percent said yes; 51 percent, no.⁴⁷

A Diminished Coalition

A few months before the November 2004 election, Republican National Chairman Ed Gillespie declared, "The party of George W. Bush is very much the party of Ronald Reagan."⁴⁸ In some ways, George W. Bush's victory over John F. Kerry demonstrates the continued utility of the Reagan coalition. Most of the top groups supporting Bush were ones that once backed Ronald Reagan and George H. W. Bush (see Table 2).

Especially noteworthy was the decisive support Bush received from those aged 35-49. These voters constituted the Reagan generation, those born between the years 1955 and 1969, whose first presidential votes were cast between 1976 and 1988. According to a study by Mason-Dixon Polling and Research, the Reagan generation was instrumental to Bush's margin of victory (see Table 3). These voters cast solid majorities for Bush, while those in all other age groups supported Kerry. Young voters, in particular, were strongly pro-Democratic. According to a Zogby International post-election poll, 62 percent of those aged eighteen to twenty-four backed Kerry. An equal percentage of first-time voters also voted for Kerry.⁴⁹ Political scientists believe new voters hold the nation's political future in their hands. Once new voters become committed to a party—a process that occurs fairly quickly—they become, in the phrase

used by political scientist V. O. Key, “stand-patters.”⁵⁰ Rarely, do voting habits become altered—a fact of party life that has been reinforced by today’s bitter red vs. blue partisanship. The continuance of support from first-time Reagan voters was good news for Bush. But the future suggests that the Democrats might benefit from the first-time Kerry voters.

Table 2
The Reagan Coalition Redux: 2004 Bush Strengths in Rank Order

Group	Bush Percentage
Republicans	91
Very conservative	89
Conservative	84
Born-again	65
Attend church daily	64
Rural	64
Investor class	61
Attend church once a week	60
Protestant	60
White	59
Married	58
Children under 17 years of age	57
Income of \$75,000 or more	56
Age 30-49 years old	56
Less than high school	56
South	55
Central Great Lakes	55
Age 35-54 years old	55
Some College	55

Private employee	54
Men	53

Source: Zogby International, post-election poll, November 3-5, 2004.

Table 3 The Reagan Generation vs. All Other Age Groups (in percentages).*				
State	Reagan Generation Vote for Bush	Reagan Generation Vote for Kerry	All Other Age Groups Vote for Bush	All Other Age Groups Vote for Kerry
Florida	56	43	49	50
Ohio	59	40	48	51
Iowa	56	43	48	51
Nevada	56	43	49	50
New Mexico	54	45	48	51

* Note: The Reagan Generation refers to ages 35-49 years old.

Source: Jonathan Pontell and J. Brad Coker, "The Invisible Generation Elects a President," *The Polling Report*, November 29, 2004, p. 7.

Some believe that the Reagan/Bush coalition may temper the support it has lost from young and first-time voters by the emergence of a growing investor class. According to a Zogby International post-election poll, 26 percent say they personally own stock on the New York Stock Exchange or NASDAQ, while another 44 percent say they own a 401K or some other pension plan. When all respondents are asked if they considered themselves to be a member of the "investor class," 27 percent answered yes. And of these, 61 percent voted for Bush; 37 percent backed Kerry.⁵¹ Some believe that as young voters enter the workforce and become vested in the country's economic markets, their party preferences will shift to the Republicans. Only time will tell, though history suggests otherwise.

There can be no doubt that it was the war on terror that clinched Bush's

reelection. During the fall campaign, Vice President Dick Cheney scared voters by darkly warning that if they made the “wrong choice”—that is, voting for John Kerry—then, “the danger is that we’ll get hit again [by terrorists] and we’ll be hit in a way that will be more devastating.”⁵² Former House Speaker Newt Gingrich hailed Cheney’s bluntness, saying, “Dick Cheney has understated the difference in danger to the United States between a Bush and a Kerry presidency.”⁵³ Cheney’s remarks were among the most dire offered since 1964, when Lyndon B. Johnson ran television advertisements featuring a nuclear bomb exploding and implied that Barry Goldwater would lead the country into a nuclear exchange with the Soviet Union.

The Bush-Cheney exploitation of fear worked. According to the 2004 exit polls, 19 percent cited terrorism as the most important issue and of these, 86 percent supported Bush. Moreover, a solid majority (54 percent) believed the nation was safer than it had been in 2000, and 79 percent of these voters backed Bush. Overall, 58 percent said they trusted Bush to handle terrorism; only 40 percent trusted Kerry.⁵⁴ Married women were especially receptive to Bush’s claim that he could keep them and their families safe. In 2004, women gave Kerry a mere 3-point advantage over Bush, whereas in 2000, Al Gore had an 11-point lead.⁵⁵ Decades before, Richard Nixon noted the power of fear in political campaigns, saying: “People react to fear, not love. They don’t teach that in Sunday school, but it’s true.”⁵⁶ The results of the 2004 election verified the truth behind Nixon’s long ago assertion.

A Twenty-First Century Coalition Struggles to be Born

Despite George W. Bush’s win, the Reagan coalition is not nearly as potent as it once was. Contrast George W. Bush’s vote in 2004 with the support his father received

sixteen years earlier. While the figures are similar, the power of the Reagan coalition translated Bush Sr.'s 53 percent of the popular vote into 426 electoral votes thanks to victories in 40 states. This year, Bush's 51 percent garnered him just 286 electoral votes and 30 states. Bush's puny electoral vote margin ranks among the smallest in history—close to his 271 votes in 2000, Woodrow Wilson's 277 votes in 1916, and Jimmy Carter's 297 votes in 1976. Unlike the comprehensive Reagan and George H. W. Bush victories, the 2004 contest came down to a single state: Ohio. If Ohio's twenty electoral votes had switched from Bush to Kerry, then the Democrat would have become President-elect, and Republicans would be singing the post-election blues.

A principal reason the Reagan coalition is losing its clout is that the United States is experiencing profound demographic and societal transformations—changes that will only accelerate in the years ahead. Take family life. Newly released Census Bureau figures show that since 1970, the percentage of households containing five or more people has fallen by half—dropping from 21 percent to 10 percent.⁵⁷ According to Barbara Whitehead, co-director of the National Marriage Project at Rutgers University: “It's clear from [the new Census figures] that compared to the middle of the 20th century, marriage is not nearly a universal status of adulthood. There is,” she adds, “much more diversity in living arrangements.”⁵⁸ The census data clearly show that the father-knows-best era of half a century ago is giving way to one that is perhaps best represented by *Bridget Jones*, a 2001 movie that depicted a single and somewhat youngish heroine. A prolonged single life is certainly a sign of the times. According to the Census Bureau, the number of people living alone has increased from 17 percent in 1970 to 26 percent in 2003.⁵⁹ But when couples do decide to merge, marriage is not always the option. From

1960 to 2000, the number of unmarried couples grew tenfold from fewer than 500,000 to 5,500,000.⁶⁰ Simply put, American life today consists of every conceivable household arrangement.

Non-whites are also writing a new and significant chapter in the twenty-first century story. In the old colonial city of Boston, whites are a minority—an historic first.⁶¹ By 2050, it is estimated that whites will be a minority everywhere.⁶² Tiger Woods, whose father is black and mother is Thai, is emblematic of the changing times. In 1997, Woods simultaneously became the first African-American and the first Asian-American to win the Masters golf tournament. In the Bush family, George P. Bush—son of Florida Governor Jeb Bush and his Mexican-born wife, Columba—symbolizes the presence of the “little brown ones”—as George H. W. Bush referred to his grandchildren during his 1988 presidential campaign.⁶³ According to the 2000 U.S. Census, the Hispanic population grew 58 percent from 1990 to 35.3 million. Hispanics now rival blacks as the nation’s most numerous minority.⁶⁴

These stories are portents of even greater changes to come. In 1998 alone, there were 1.3 million intermarriages among whites, Asians, and Hispanics.⁶⁵ Pollster John Zogby has escribed the emerging “Tiger Woods Effect.” According to Zogby, the 1860 Census contained only three racial categories: black, white, and “quadroon”—a slave term that described someone of mixed heritage who was at least one-fourth black.⁶⁶ In 2000, the census contained nineteen racial categories—including white, Black, African-American or Negro, American Indian or Alaska Native, Mexican, Mexican-American, Chicano, Puerto Rican, Cuban, other Spanish/Hispanic/Latino, Asian-Indian, Chinese, Filipino, Japanese, Korean, Vietnamese, other Asian, Native Hawaiian, Guamanian or

Chamorro, Samoan, and other Pacific Islander. These categories reflect a melding of many racial cultures. Today, 2.4 percent categorize themselves as multiracial; among children under the age of eighteen, 4.2 percent.⁶⁷ As interracial marriages become more commonplace, they are more frequently accepted. According to recent surveys, 75 percent say marriage between blacks and whites is acceptable; among teenagers, the figure is an all-time high of 91 percent.⁶⁸

Changes in skin tone have been accompanied by the growth of non-Christian religious communities. Chief among these are Islam, Hinduism, and Buddhism. Islam is the eighth largest denomination in the United States—bigger than the Episcopal Church, the Presbyterian Church U.S.A., the United Church of Christ, and the Assemblies of God.⁶⁹ Currently, there are between 1.5 million and 3.4 million American Muslims.⁷⁰ Thanks to an influx of immigrants from Iran, Pakistan, Yemen, Lebanon, and Afghanistan—due to the domestic turmoil that has racked those nations—Muslims are becoming a more visible part of the American landscape.⁷¹ During the past two decades, two-thousand mosques, along with numerous Islamic schools, have been built. Today, there are an estimated 1,200 interest groups, publishers, and radio stations that cater to largely Muslim audiences.⁷²

As with Muslims, the number of Asian-Indian immigrants has risen dramatically. The first wave began in the 1960s when thousands of students and professionals—many of them Hindus—emigrated from India to the United States. A decade later they were joined by other, less well-educated family members who took jobs as taxi drivers, clerks, small business operators, and factory workers. From 1990 to 2000, the number of Asian-Indian migrants rose once more from 800,000 to more than 1.6 million. Many found good-

paying jobs in the burgeoning high-technology industries. Among the most successful are Vinod Khosla, co-founder of Sun Microsystems, and Sabeer Bhatia, who started Hotmail.⁷³

The number of Buddhists has also sharply increased. Today, there are more than seventy-five forms of Buddhism and five million Buddhists scattered across the United States—thanks to increased immigration from Japan, China, and Vietnam.⁷⁴ Kathy Jaekles, a twenty-five year practitioner, says things have changed since her mother converted to Buddhism when she was a teenager: “People are more accepting and tolerant of Buddhists. I feel freer to tell people I’m Buddhist.”⁷⁵ She is not alone. A 1997 survey of 750 human resource professionals found 68 percent offered flexible schedules for religious observances.⁷⁶

New religions are just one part of a profound change in the country’s spiritual life. Increasingly, many Americans are looking within for spiritual help. The result is an eschewing of so-called “mediating institutions”—especially religious ones—that had often been previously used to answer life’s basic questions: “Who are we? Why are we here?” Over the past four decades, there has been a substantial increase in the number of those who do not attend any church. In 1963, 49 percent told the Gallup Organization they attended church regularly; 50 percent answered “seldom” or not at all.⁷⁷ Exit polls in 2000 weekly church attendance had fallen to 42 percent, while 56 percent answered monthly, seldom, or never.⁷⁸ In 2004, the figures were much the same despite the efforts of the Bush campaign to bring more church-goers to the polls: 42 percent said they went to church weekly; 57 percent answered monthly, a few times a year, or never.⁷⁹

More than three decades ago, social demographers Richard M. Scammon and Ben J. Wattenberg coined the phrase “demography is destiny.”⁸⁰ In many ways, the 2004 election shows signs of an emerging Democratic coalition that is young, less-religious, non-white, and single. John F. Kerry attracted broad support from these groups (see Table 4). These groups are likely to become an even more important part of American life, thanks to their growing numbers. Writing in *The American Conservative*, Steve Sailer notes that while George W. Bush carried 19 states with the highest white fertility rates, John F. Kerry carried the sixteen states with the lowest white fertility rates.⁸¹ These numbers would seem to be good news for Bush and the Republicans. But any rejoicing should be tempered by a National Center for Health Statistics report that showed the average white woman giving birth at a pace consistent with having 1.83 babies during her lifetime, or 13 percent *below* the replacement rate of 2.1 children per woman.⁸² Sailer reports that even excluding vast Alaska, Bush’s counties were only one-fourth as densely populated as Kerry’s.⁸³

Table 4
Kerry Coalition 21st Century Strengths in Rank Order

Group	Kerry Percentage
African-American	92
Age 18-24	62
First-time voter	62
Single	61
Divorced/widowed/separated	60
Attend church on special occasions	60
Hispanic	58
Age 18-29 years old	56
Registered within the last six months	55
Attend church rarely	54
No children less than 17 years of age	51

Source: Zogby International, post-election poll, November 3-5, 2004.

One of the best places to see the erosion of the Reagan coalition is Orange County, California. Site of the John Wayne Airport, Disneyland, and the Crystal

Cathedral (home to Dutch Reform televangelist Robert Schuller) Orange County was once a bastion of right-wing conservatism. For years, the profoundly anticommunist and conspiracy-minded John Birch Society called Orange County home. Today, the area is increasingly non-white in its population and more Democratic in its politics. During the 1990s, Hispanics rose to 31 percent of the county's population and Asians increased to 14 percent, even as the number of whites declined by 6 percent.⁸⁴ In 2004, the inevitable happened: the Census Bureau reported that whites had become an official minority (49 percent).⁸⁵ Orange County's future can be glimpsed in these statistics: Hispanics comprise 44 percent of those under eighteen years of age; among those over age seventy, three-quarters are white.⁸⁶

The political transformation is just as profound. Today, Orange County is represented in Congress by Loretta Sanchez, an Hispanic who came to office in 1996, by besting Republican incumbent Bob Dornan. Dornan had earned the nickname "B-1 Bob," thanks to his support of the B-1 bomber and other Cold War era military hardware. As the campaign began, Dornan boasted: "She can't beat me. Bob Dornan is a father of five, grandfather of ten, military man, been married forty-one years. She has no kids, no military, no track record."⁸⁷ But on election day, voters gave Dornan a shock: Sanchez won by 984 votes.⁸⁸ Since then, Sanchez has become an entrenched incumbent; in 2004, she won a fifth term with 60 percent of the vote.

Demography suggests that future congresses will have more Loretta Sanchezes. Already in the upcoming 109th Congress (2005-2006), there are twenty-four Hispanics in the House: 19 Democrats (including Sanchez) and five Republicans. In 2005, the Senate will welcome two new Hispanic members: Republican Mel Martinez (Florida) and

Democrat Ken Salazar (Colorado).⁸⁹

Is Demography Really Destiny?

While the Reagan coalition is struggling to maintain its majority, its demise is hardly inevitable. Karl Rove, George W. Bush's political guru, maintains that Bush's tenure is reminiscent of William McKinley's. McKinley, it should be recalled, sparked a Republican revival that broke a twenty year two-party deadlock that often resulted in minority presidents and disputed presidential outcomes (e.g., 1876, 1884, 1888, and 1892). Rove's thesis was outlined in the October 2, 2000 issue of *U.S. News and World Report*:

Under Rove's theory, America is experiencing a "transformational" era comparable to the Industrial Revolution more than a century ago. He sees parallels to the election of 1896, when Republican governor William McKinley of Ohio—"a natural harmonizer," according to one admirer—rode to victory on a belief that the GOP could no longer base its appeal on old divisions from the Civil War because the nation had utterly changed. Today, Rove argues, the "new economy," based on technology, information, and entrepreneurship, is again transforming America, along with a new wave of immigrants from Latin America, Asia, and elsewhere. And the country is eager for a new leader who will, in Bush's inelegant phrase, be a "uniter, not a divider"—just like McKinley was.⁹⁰

In reality, George W. Bush has not lived up to his McKinley-like potential. McKinley "natural harmonizing" skills created a broad coalition of Northern labor and industrial capital. But Bush's has hardly been "a uniter" and his partisan base (both

ideologically and in sheer geographic size) has shrunk. While the red states loom large following Bush's victory, it is worth remembering that in four straight presidential elections Republicans have ceded the entire West coast (including Reagan's native California) to the Democrats. Recall that Reagan won every state in the Far West twice. During the same period (1992-2004), Republicans lost every Northeastern state, except New Hampshire in 2000, which went to Bush only because third-party candidate Ralph Nader was a spoiler. Reagan, on the other hand, carried every Northeastern state twice, save Rhode Island.⁹¹

Far from creating a renewed Reagan-like majority based on the transformational demography and economy of the 21st century, it seems clear that the base of the Reagan/Bush coalition has shrunk to the South and the interior heartland. Fear of terrorism was crucial to Bush's reelection chances. Another terrorist strike—especially one as massive as September 11 on the U.S. homeland—would revive fears about an invisible enemy and possibly give the Reagan/Bush coalition a jolt of renewed energy. However, such a catastrophic attack could also spawn a Cold War-like McCarthyism, with Americans wondering who is to blame and ascribing it to those holding power. (Democrats would probably escape much damage, as they hold so little political authority.)

It seems clear that with the sole exception of the so-called “investor class” the Reagan/Bush coalition has yet to court non-white twenty-first century voters. Hispanics did vote for George W. Bush in greater numbers in 2004 than in 2000, though there is some dispute as to how high that percentage really was. A Zogby International post-election poll found Bush with 41 percent of the Hispanic vote—better than the 35 percent

he won in 2000.⁹² But there is no sign that Hispanics are moving in large numbers into the Republican party. Meanwhile, other minorities remain firmly ensconced in the Democratic camp. The 2004 exit poll found Kerry winning 88 percent of the African-American vote and a solid 56 percent from Asians.⁹³

Yet, George W. Bush has given every sign of wanting to use his second term to create a revived 21st century Reagan coalition. His plans to create private Social Security accounts (thereby spawning more investors) and immigration reform (an obvious overture to Hispanics) are omens for the future. Bush's leadership on these issues will force the opposition Democrats to react. And in so doing, the leadership skills of both parties will be sorely tested.

That's just the point. Demography is not really destiny. For demography to matter, there must be strong issues and leaders to match. A century ago, social commentators described an emerging demography that would change 20th century America from a rural, white Protestant, and mostly agricultural society into an industrialized, blue-collar, ethnic, Catholic, and urban one. In 1926, Daniel Chauncey Brewer wrote a book titled *The Conquest of New England by the Immigrant*.⁹⁴ Yet, it took a Great Depression and the leadership of Franklin D. Roosevelt to translate this new demography into an electoral majority. And that was twenty-eight years after the election of Roosevelt's cousin, Theodore, in 1904, when immigration and industrialization fueled the first Roosevelt's progressive movement!

Today, the United States is experiencing some of the same feelings that were commonplace a century ago—a sense that the nation people once knew is quickly ebbing away. Patrick J. Buchanan writes in *The Death of the West* how one fan came up to him

recently and said, “Pat, we’re losing the country we grew up in.”⁹⁵ The prevalence of foreign language cable networks such as Telemundo, multi-lingual election ballots and government documents, and even ATMS that converse with customers in different languages (mostly Spanish) are signs of the times. Another portent of the future is the emergence of new family forms—probably best exhibited by ballot questions asking whether gays should be permitted to receive state marriage licenses.

George W. Bush benefitted from a backlash against these dramatic transformations. In that sense, Bush was like Reagan. But Reagan’s backlash came from those whom social commentators Richard M. Scammon and Ben J. Wattenberg described in 1970 as “unyoung, unpoor, and unblack”—i.e., the *real* majority.⁹⁶ Today, that old majority is rapidly becoming a 21st century minority. Nonetheless, that old conservative desire to climb atop the globe and yell “STOP!” was much in evidence in 2004. Among those who believed moral values was the most important issue (22 percent of the electorate and the number one concern), Bush won 80 percent of their votes.⁹⁷ To many, the emergence of gay marriage also portended a nation in decline. Measures banning gay unions were on the ballot in eleven states and were overwhelmingly approved in all of them: Arkansas (75 percent), Georgia (76 percent), Kentucky (75 percent), Michigan (59 percent), Mississippi (86 percent), Montana (67 percent), North Dakota (73 percent), Ohio (62 percent), Oklahoma (76 percent), Oregon (57 percent), and Utah (66 percent). In each case, supporters voted overwhelmingly for Bush. But even as Americans were rejecting gay marriage, they were forging a consensus around some form of acceptance of homosexual unions: 35 percent favored civil unions; 25 percent thought gays should legally marry; and 37 percent wanted no legal recognition.

In sum, Bush benefitted from a sense that the old rules had been lifted and a new moral freedom was emerging.⁹⁸ This new freedom was creating a country that was more expressive in its personal and family choices, but also far less orderly. Bush projected a Reagan-like sense of fatherly order—something many welcomed in an era of overwhelming and vast social and economic transformations. But was this the Reagan coalition’s last gasp? Or, will George W. Bush build on what’s left of the Reagan Revolution and renew the old coalition once more?

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