defining "moral"

In the weeks following the 2004 presidential election, most political pundits pointed to one factor that led to George W. Bush's victory—the importance of "moral values" to most Americans. While red-state traditionalists celebrated their victory, blue-state liberals voiced grave concerns about the future of their nation. Were Americans' political sensibilities moving further and further to the right? Would the separation between church and state gradually erode? Would *Davey and Goliath* replace *Will and Grace* as television's must-see duo?

The simple answer is that Americans, on the whole, are no more guided by "moral values" today than in the past. While exit polls following the 2004 election showed that moral values topped the list of issues that mattered to voters, this is not a new phenomenon. Moral values topped the list of issues in exit polls conducted in both the 2000 and 1996 elections. What's new is the way political persuasions influence how Americans define "moral issues."

A new Harris Poll finds that 45 percent of voters in the 2004 election believe that moral values were "very important" in deciding which candidate to vote for. However, this proportion was roughly twice as high among Bush voters as Kerry voters (59 versus 30 percent, respectively). Is it possible that red staters are simply more "moral" than their blue-state peers? Harris pollsters delved further and asked those who named moral values as "very important" to elaborate in their own words what the phrase meant to them. No closed-ended categories were offered; study participants could answer freely. While "honesty" was at or near the top of the list for Bush and Kerry voters alike, that's where the similarities end. Bush voters viewed moral issues in terms of concrete practices and policies consistent with the Christian Right agenda, while Kerry supporters endorsed more abstract ideals such as equality and justice.

For instance, 25 percent of Bush voters, yet just one percent of Kerry voters, cited "protection of marriage between a man and woman," and more than 20 percent of Bush supporters (compared to three percent of Kerry voters) named anti-abortion efforts as the key moral issue that guided their voting. Kerry voters, in contrast, associated morality with broader, more humanitarian values. Kerry voters were more likely than Bush voters to name honesty (27 versus 21 percent), integrity (14 versus 11 percent), caring for and having respect for others (12 versus three percent), peace in the Middle East (15 versus one percent), equality and civil rights (8 versus three percent), and helping those less fortunate (10 versus one percent). While such data hardly proves there are two Americas, it does provide strong evidence that liberals and conservatives view their worlds through very different lenses. These patterns also suggest that it is easier to capture the concrete morality of conservatives than the abstract morality of political liberals in television sound bites. (See the *Contexts* Forum that begins on the following page of this issue for a related discussion.)

what voters mean when they say that moral values are "very important" to them, by 2004 voting behavior
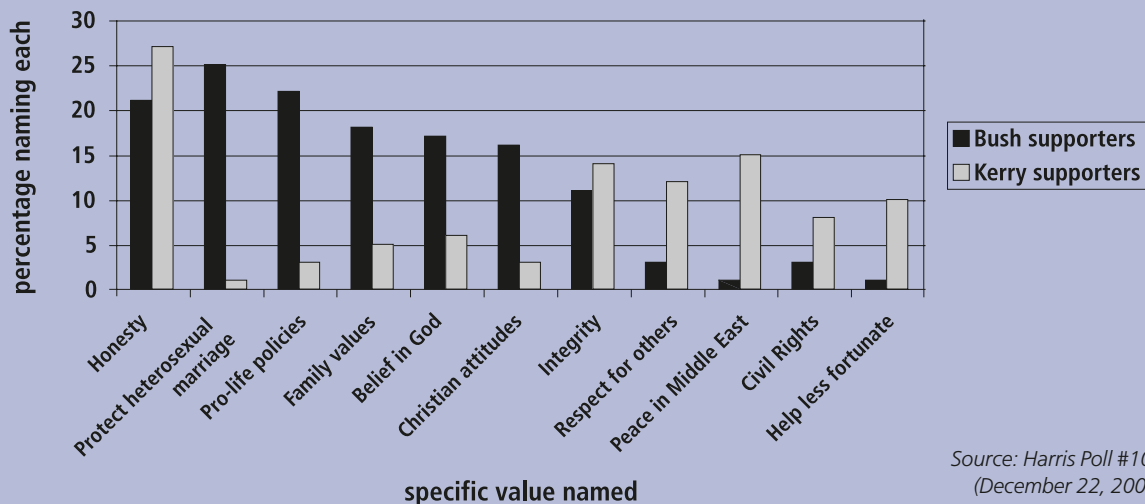
Source: Harris Poll #100
(December 22, 2004)