



The Election of 2004 – Collective Memory Project

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NELSON: Dean Mark Rozell of the Policy School here at George Mason University. Among your many books, are two we're going to have reference to today. First of all, the book that you and John Green and Clyde Wilcox did, called *The Values Campaign?: The Christian Right and the 2004 Elections*. This is the fifth such book that you did. How did you get interested in this subject and how did the subject of the Christian right in national elections evolve over the course of those five books?

ROZELL: Well, it was not an area that I studied actually, in my own graduate studies back in the 1980s, although I'm an Americanist and studied both national institutions and the electoral process. [00:01:00] I was also very fascinated with and followed closely, Virginia state politics, that being my home at the time, and having lived there for 30 years of my adult life and had very carefully followed politics there.

So in the early 1990s, my friend, Clyde Wilcox, a professor at Georgetown University, approached me about an idea that he said bubbled up from a



graduate student who said those of you, speaking of Clyde that is, who've been following the religious right movement in American politics, have been focusing too much on the sort of broad national perspective, and have been looking at the big name figures, Jerry Falwell, Pat Robertson. But the real action that people should be paying attention to is at the grassroots. It really should be focused on what's going on with the school board races, the library boards, the various controversies over textbooks in the public schools, as well as literature [00:02:00] in the public libraries. He said, that's where you're going to find the real intensity of the movement. So as Clyde and I talked he said it would be a really nice idea to do something that's a state-based, focused study, on the religious right movement, with an emphasis on the sort of grassroots politics of the movement. So, since I had a very deep interest in Virginia state politics, which also happened to be the home of the Christian Coalition and former Moral Majority, and of Pat Robertson and the late Jerry Falwell, it seemed like the logical place to have done a careful case study of the rise and evolution of the religious right movement in American politics.

That resulted in a book that Clyde and I wrote together, called *Second Coming: The New Christian Right in Virginia Politics*. I had spent months interviewing many of the major figures, as well as various [00:03:00] grassroots activists in the religious right movement in Virginia. It was something that just captured my interest very deeply and I've maintained an academic interest in studying religious right politics ever since. I've never let the subject go.

NELSON: Our focus is on the 2004 election. What happened within the Christian right and its role in American elections, during the years leading up to 2004?

ROZELL: Right. Well, the scholars who study the contemporary religious right, or Christian right movement, whichever phrase they prefer, tend to trace its origins to the 1970s. There were a number of grassroots movements, particularly over textbook controversies and the like, in public schools, and also gay rights initiatives in a number of states, that helped to mobilize a force [00:04:00] in American politics that really had not been very active.

I remember in my focused study on Virginia, there was a campaign against what was called pari-mutuel betting. It was a popular referendum in 1978, and Reverend Jerry Falwell led a movement against this referendum, ultimately defeated it, and he said at the time, "This is a portent of future endeavors together." In other words saying he understood the power of getting politically

engaged, and what can be done to, in his phrasing or paraphrasing him, being good stewards of God on this earth through politics. He had previously always advised his followers to stay separated from the political process, that God takes care of matters of this world and evangelical Christians shouldn't really [00:05:00] focus their endeavors on politics. But that completely changed when he got a taste of what impact he could have. We know the story of course, of the rise of the Moral Majority that he founded in the late '70s, and his claim later, that he had helped mobilize at least several million additional evangelical and born again Christians for Ronald Reagan and the Republicans in 1980.

So the religious right movement had taken on enormous importance and this was one of those phenomena that I think many observers of American politics simply did not get, because they were not familiar with people who come out of the evangelical and born again movements in a sense, and so many of the leading political observers and journalists were just completely surprised by what happened in the 1980 election. Falwell and the Moral Majority became known as kind of kingmakers. There was a lot of emphasis then, on their impact [00:06:00] on American politics and on the Republican Party in particular, and many candidate on the Republican side started paying very, very close attention to leading figures in the movement.

The Moral Majority, as you know disbanded in the late 1980s, and one of the interesting perspectives about the religious right movement in American politics is how often people declare the movement politically dead, that something happens, they have a poor showing at a campaign. Pat Robertson's presidential campaign, which was the most expensive one in 1988, I think he got a single delegate. The Moral Majority disbanded and people started to leave the Christian right for dead in American politics. What happened was Pat Robertson took his mass mailing list, which was enormous, and his contributor list, from the 1988 campaign, and created a grassroots organization, the Christian Coalition, [00:07:00] and appointed a savvy, more secular oriented, I think, political activist, Ralph Reed, who could put a very different face on the movement than many of the religious-based leaders, who had been the primary faces of the movement back in the 1980s. The movement then really took off in the 1980s, particularly its ability to influence Republican Party platform positions, party nominations. The Christian Coalition became known as the major kingmaker in Republican Party politics in the 1990s.



By the 2000 election, which is very important for the context of talking about our topic today, 2004, there was a significant drop-off in voter participation among white conservative evangelicals, [00:08:00] and that was a real puzzlement to many observers, because although Bob Dole had lost his election in 1996, to Bill Clinton, he actually did a good job in mobilizing the evangelical core of the Republican Party, despite his reputation of being a more centrist-type Republican. In year 2000, to the surprise of many, there was a drop-off of approximately 4,000 white evangelical voters from the '96 election cycle to 2000.

NELSON: Four thousand?

ROZELL: Four million I meant, four million.

NELSON: Four million.

ROZELL: I'm sorry, so a drop-off of about four million voters, among the evangelical core of the Republican Party, and that was a puzzlement to many because, of course, George Bush was perceived by people outside the movement, as a candidate who was tailor made for the religious right. But I think what a lot of people forget is that in 2000, he ran as more of a centrist conservative [00:09:00] than he did as a religious right conservative, given the field of candidates that he was running against for the nomination that year.

Karl Rove and others had said that after the 2000 election, the key to getting George Bush reelected was to find those white evangelical voters who had in effect sat it out in the 2000 election cycle, and reenergize them, so that they indeed do turn out in 2004. Again, there were observers who were discounting the ability of the religious right to mobilize its core of supporters, people who looked at the enormous drop-off in voter participation among that group of voters, from 1996 to 2000. And then, the eventual effective collapse of the Christian Coalition as [00:10:00] an influential national organization in American politics, although it still existed as a letterhead organization and still was active, by the 2000 election, it was not really an important player so much as it had been in the 1990s. So, a lot of people were just willing to say at that point, maybe the religious right isn't that important in American politics any more, and they found out differently in 2004.

NELSON: I want to come back to George W. Bush in 2000, but first, you know, how is it that evangelical Christians became the Christian right, and a core Republican constituency, when you think about the popularity of Jimmy Carter in 1976?

ROZELL: Right, that's right.



NELSON: And then just a few years later the movement toward the Republican Party has taken place and there's such a thing as the Christian right. What explains how that group became [00:11:00] the core Republican constituency in many ways?

ROZELL: Yeah. Well that's exactly right, because many had voted for Jimmy Carter in 1976, who ran very proudly as a born again Christian and wore his religiosity on his sleeve. You may remember of course, many observers of American politics who were outside of the Deep South in particular, finding this quite a curiosity. Why would this man be talking about these things publicly, this is not what politicians do. But he had very significant appeal among people who in effect had a champion who was unembarrassed to express his deep faith in Jesus Christ, and talk about the importance of religion to his public life.

So to answer your question, what eventually happened of course was that the southern evangelicals who had lined up in favor of Jimmy Carter, became very [00:12:00] discontented with his policies primarily. So, when it came down to the really core issues that they care about and back then, more than anything else it was the issue of abortion, Jimmy Carter was not their right candidate. So, a number of very savvy political strategists on the Republican side, who had observed what I discussed earlier; Jerry Falwell's activity in Virginia. The very large following that he had nationally, with his Old Time Gospel Hour, and then his throwing himself into the political game in Virginia, with the anti-pari-mutuel betting campaign in 1978. They saw potential there, to mobilize a group of voters who either had previously sat on their hands on election day, or in the case of 1976, [00:13:00] came out for Jimmy Carter but had become discontented with his administration. So, folks like Richard Viguerie, for example, the folks who were part of what was then called the new right movement in American politics; Howard Phillips, several others, discussed the possibility of transforming American politics by aligning southern evangelical and born again Christians, with pro-life Catholics in the Midwest and the Northeast, along with the traditional core groups of support for the Republican Party that generally came out of the Chambers of Commerce and the business community and the low tax folks and the like, and creating a sort of new coalition of American politics. [00:14:00]

They were successful in convincing Ronald Reagan that there's a sleeping giant in American politics waiting to be awakened. And so when Ronald Reagan gave a speech, now very famous, in Houston in 1980, in which he said words to the



effect, speaking to evangelical pastors, I know you cannot endorse me but I endorse you. You know, I stand with you. They had not heard that before, someone who was so unembarrassed to go before this group of individuals who felt that in the mainstream culture, they had been marginalized, even mocked, never taken seriously, and here was this major presidential candidate saying, I'm with you.

Now, there are many debates to this day about how authentic Reagan was as a religious conservative president, right? Because I don't think he governed particularly [00:15:00] well from their perspective, on the issues that they cared about. But the very fact that he reached out and the way he did, and gave legitimacy to conservative evangelicals by saying I'm one of you and I'm not embarrassed to stand before you and say that I think we should put God back in the classroom and we should protect human life. That was extremely powerful in its time.

NELSON: Yeah, for years... And I'm asking this because your mention of evangelical pastors, stimulates this question. For years, it was the Democrats who had sort of the grassroots constituency in the form of organized labor. The Republicans really didn't have anything comparable to the kind of turn out the vote operation and so on, that the Democrats had, through the unions. Do evangelical pastors become the equivalent of local labor leaders, for the Republican Party?

ROZELL: In a sense they do. [00:16:00] I mean if you look at the voting patterns now, the white evangelical Protestants are overwhelmingly Republican. The mainline churches tend to be more split in their voting patterns, but when you look at the new evangelical churches, for example, their pastors are enormously powerful. Actually, that's a very key part of the story, I think, of the 2004 election, because I was mentioning before, the effective collapse of the Christian Coalition as an organizing vehicle to mobilize religious conservatives at the grassroots throughout the country. So many people were projecting, after the 2000 election, with the enormous drop-off in voting by white evangelical Protestants, between '96 and 2000, and the effective demise of the Christian Coalition, that this movement wasn't going to be able to effectively mobilize voters in 2004, very effectively for [00:17:00] George Bush. Well the fact is, the movement was there, it was very active, the turnout was fantastic for the evangelical core of the Republican Party. It all happened as a result of grassroots activism in a number of key states in the Electoral College in particular, where evangelical pastors had become very actively mobilized. There was a direct outreach effort, campaign,



on the part of the Bush Administration, to these pastors and to their churches, even to the point of requesting the lists of people who belonged to their churches, to use as a vehicle for political contacting. There were local and state level groups that bubbled up and were led [00:18:00] primarily by a number of evangelical pastors and other activists in the religious conservative movement, that did the work that the Christian Coalition had been famous for doing back in the 1990. And so I thought that really showed the enduring power of the movement, right? That you don't need a Moral Majority or a Christian Coalition, to direct from the top, and then try to deliver the votes that way. There's an activist core there that cares very deeply about these issues and they can get mobilized through many different vehicles in electoral politics, and that happened largely on its own, through the efforts of a number of leaders, including a large number of evangelical pastors. Much of it, I believe, was very much coordinated with the Bush campaign at that time, and they were able to derive resources from various persons [00:19:00] and groups who were sympathetic to that movement or who cared about Bush's reelection and knew that mobilizing these people was absolutely critical to his reelection campaign. And it worked.

NELSON: Do you have any sense, focusing on George W. Bush now, that when -- because his 1994 successful campaign for governor of Texas, occurred not that many years after his personal affirmation of faith, and the effect that had on the conduct of his own life. Did he connect with -- while in Texas, did he connect with the Christian conservative community in that state as he ran for and won, and then was reelected governor, in 1998? Did he begin forging a connection then and there?

ROZELL: He did, yeah he did. I think he became more outspoken in those areas [00:20:00] as he moved toward presidential politics. Some people have suggested that was carefully calculated. I think as you review the story of George Bush and how he overcame the demons in his life, right? I mean, he was a pretty misdirected young man, troubled by alcoholism and a number of failed business ventures. It wasn't until he was about 40 years of age, that he had this major change in his life, that he attributes to accepting Jesus Christ in his life. Everybody knows the story, he stopped drinking. That's a very powerful story for evangelical and born again Christians, you know somebody who had fallen in his life and then was able to overcome his demons, and the impact of devoting his life to Jesus [00:21:00] and straightening himself out. I think many people in the evangelical and born again communities found that a very powerful personal



story, and it gave him credibility as someone who was authentic. I think that's really key to the importance of understanding his ability to connect with those voters, because time and again, more secular oriented Republican candidates for office had used similar type claims about having a religious awakening of some kind.

NELSON: Are you thinking of his father, for example?

ROZELL: Yeah, his father, it never seemed genuine with his father, it really didn't. When he spoke before religious conservative groups he never looked comfortable. It never looked authentic, it looked forced, honestly. I think he understood [00:22:00] why politically, it was important to do so, but we know that he shifted his position, for example, on abortion, and a number of core social issues, between his own presidential campaign in 1980 and after having become Ronald Reagan's vice president and seeking the presidency himself. He was outright clumsy in those meetings with religious right figures, and they never trusted him as one of them.

Even Reagan, although they speak extremely fondly of him today, there was an enormous amount of discontent in the religious conservative movement in the 1980s, with the policies of the administration, that he was more concerned about the economy and fighting communism than he was concerned about moral values. He would give speeches where he would throw in the language about putting God back in the classroom and protecting human life, [00:23:00] but he never made a big push for constitutional amendments for putting prayer in the classroom or restricting abortion rights, for example. It's pretty well-known that he knew and he understood that he had to give that annual speech to the pro-life rally in Washington, D.C., and make these overtures, but he was not going to sacrifice the core issues of his agenda by delving into these really hot-button issues that could only be very divisive in American politics and hurt the rest of his agenda.

So along comes George W. Bush and he's the real deal, and that's really meaningful, because the religious conservatives feel that time and again, they've heard from Republican politicians, the right rhetoric, all the promises, but then once elected the message is wait your turn, we're not ready for this yet. You don't want to speak up too loudly now, because it's going to hurt the rest of our agenda. We're with you [00:24:00] but please be patient, and the patience, quite frankly, was running out and by 2004 in particular, many religious conservatives came to the conclusion this is our time. Finally, we got someone



who's the real deal in office and okay, he had to get through the first election and now, with reelection in 2004, this is the one and best opportunity for the movement to push the social agenda.

NELSON: On the subject of authenticity, you remember what Bush said when he was asked, in some sort of forum, who his favorite political philosopher was.

ROZELL: Jesus Christ, right, yes.

NELSON: Because he changed my heart.

ROZELL: He changed my heart, yeah, brilliant, brilliant. Yeah, now, you know, to secular political observers, the people I talk to all the time, in my academic community, they thought what a dunce, I mean [00:25:00] that was the common reaction. He's asked this question, who's your favorite philosopher, and he couldn't even mention Plato or Aristotle, you know? I thought his political instinct was absolutely brilliant in that case, because here he was, someone who had been running as a "compassionate conservative." He was trying to project the image of the softer side of conservatism, and by implication, distinguish himself from the more ardently conservative candidates who were challenging in the 2000 election. Remember the cast of characters who were running in 2000. There were a lot of folks running well to the right. So he had to do something to establish his credibility with the evangelical core of the Republican Party, which turns out in big numbers in primaries and especially [00:26:00] in the caucuses, they have enormous influence. That's signaling that he did, I thought, from a political standpoint, was absolutely brilliant.

NELSON: Do you think it was authentic?

ROZELL: I think it was both politically calculated but it also reflected who he is and what he believes, yes.

NELSON: What happened in 2000? The fact that Bush didn't get as much of an evangelical turnout in 2000 as 2004. The fact that he didn't get as much as in '96.

ROZELL: It's astonishing actually.

NELSON: Some Republicans will say it's because of that sort of last weekend news revelation about his DUI conviction years ago.

ROZELL: Right, that had an impact yeah, that definitely had an impact. My memory tells me that the demographic with which he was hurt the most was middle age and older [00:27:00] women voters, many who actually do identify with so-called traditional moral values. A colleague of mine joked that these were women who were looking at their own son and thinking, you know, that's what my son does; I would never want him for president. Yeah, I think that definitely made a difference. That hurt him because that went so much against the narrative



about him, I think, and the fact that this was something that was sprung at the last minute in the campaign, you know the last weekend, and he had never put that out there, which I think really hurt him. You know the story, of course, in American politics, you have something like that, you put it out there and you put it out there early and you explain it and you get ahead of the story. He didn't do that.

NELSON: He becomes president after the 2000 election and you've already referred to the [00:28:00] efforts that his key advisors and the Republican Party generally made, to really focus on grassroots organization among evangelicals for the reelect, but I wonder, to the extent you think -- to what extent do you think politics and policy were going hand-in-hand? I'm thinking in particular, of the faith-based initiatives, the stem cell speech, maybe other things come to mind?

ROZELL: Yeah, yeah that's right. Many evangelical and born again Christians were actually unhappy with the compromise he struck on the stem cell issue. Remember, that he would allow existing lines, right? To continue to be used for research, and some had felt that that was a moral compromise that they could not accept. The Faith-Based Office, there were actually many leaders in the religious right movement, and activists too, who didn't like it, [00:29:00] very interestingly. So here was a president giving Executive Branch affirmation and stature to the role of religious-based groups, in the implementation of public policy. They should have been delighted of course, that was the assumption of he and his administration, but Pat Robertson and some other said we don't want these things being directed by the government. We don't think that that's an appropriate role for a government organization. So even there, they found that there was some significant disagreement with the direction that they were taking. And then of course, Bush had appointed someone who was openly a Democrat initially, to that office.

NELSON: John Dilulio.

ROZELL: John Dilulio with University of Pennsylvania, that's right. That had caused some concern as well, among the evangelical core of the Republican Party that you know, [00:30:00] the priorities of the Faith-Based Office would not be what they would like to see necessarily, that Dilulio would focus more on sort of inner city issues and trying to used faith-based organizations to deal with rehabilitation and that the moral issues agenda, as they perceived it more narrowly, would not be the focus of their efforts.

NELSON: How about the effect of especially the faith-based initiatives program, on non-white evangelicals--African American churches, Latino evangelical churches.



ROZELL: Yes.

NELSON: Did he have more success politically, with that program, in those constituencies?

ROZELL: Right. There is the argument that some have made, that this was a very cynical effort on the part of the administration. A colleague of mine, Michael Fauntroy, contributed a chapter to a book I had edited on the Bush presidency and religion, and the title of his chapter [00:31:00] was "Buying Black Votes." And it was exactly this topic that he wrote about, that the Faith-Based Office, many in the black community saw as kind of a cynical effort to buy off the loyalties of black evangelical pastors, and as a result, try to make inroads, through the use of social issues, in the black community. Some strategists on the Republican side, who are very sympathetic to the religious right, point to data showing, of course, that African Americans are more religious than white Americans. They read the Bible more, they attend religious services more often. They tend to be more socially conservative on issues such as gay rights and abortion rights. [00:32:00] So there's this perception among these Republican strategists, that if the moral or social issues can be brought more to the fore in the African American community, that that will break the stranglehold that the Democratic Party has, on black voters, as they perceive it. The effort was of course not politically successful in the long run. You don't see any evidence that there was any significant upswing in African American support for Republicans or for George W. Bush, based on social issues, but there was that interpretation among many, that the Faith-Based Office created an opportunity, a vehicle, for doing outreach to black evangelical pastors in the country, to try to make some political inroads in the black community.

NELSON: How about among Latinos, [00:33:00] where among whom charismatic evangelical churches have been growing.

ROZELL: Yeah, growing. Growing fantastically actually.

NELSON: And Bush did much better among Latinos in '04 than he did in 2000.

ROZELL: Yeah, yeah, that's exactly right, and there, I think the social issues actually did matter. Again, Latinos tend to be more socially conservative than Caucasian Americans, more likely to oppose gay marriage and more likely to support pro-life or anti-abortion rights messages, and Bush of course had been very successful in his gubernatorial campaigns, in attracting Latino voters. So he did have that background of being able to communicate with and connect with Latino voters, in a way that other Republicans have not been very successful doing. And of course, you know, [00:34:00] as we were discussing before the interview, Bush started to push immigration reform in his second term, and was



open to creating a path to citizenship for many of the so-called illegal immigrants, in the United States. So he did have the reputation of being a more open-minded Republican on some issues that really matter to Latino voters, and was able to make some inroads with them.

NELSON: Turning to 2004, I think you could argue that one of the most important things that happened in 2004 politics was something that happened in 2003: the State Supreme Court ruling in Massachusetts.

ROZELL: Yes, that's right.

NELSON: You know where I'm headed with this, take it and run.

ROZELL: Right. So when the Mayor of San Francisco, for example, started to, at that time, illegally [00:35:00] marry gay couples, right? And then there was the Massachusetts Court decision. That caused a shockwave among the social conservative groups, who said we have to stop this movement, stop it in its tracks. And so that led to a number of popular initiatives in states, in the 2004 election cycle. On election day, there were 11 ballot measures, and I think in 2004 calendar year, there were 13 such ballot measure, on gay marriage. Gay marriage went down to defeat in all 13 states, by very significant margins. I think between 57 percent and 86 percent, something like that, were the margins. So there were [00:36:00] some Republican strategists who were delighted by what the Mayor of San Francisco and the Massachusetts Court had done, because that awakened the evangelical and born again conservative Christian voters, who had sat on their hands on election day in year 2000. They had their vehicle of mobilization there, to help Bush get back those nearly four million white evangelical voters who had dropped off in voting between '96 and 2000.

So, the fact that these initiatives, some of them were in key battleground states, and the data show that there were significant upswings in voting in those states, among the core constituencies of the religious right, show that these initiatives probably did have a significant impact on the presidential vote totals. [00:37:00] There were, of course several very close states. Ohio, in particular, was only 130,000 votes, and there were three or four states that were even closer margins than Ohio. So, it is arguable, but I think very credible, to say that the ballot initiatives on gay marriage made a difference in the 2004 election.

NELSON: Now, do you think this was just happening independently of the Bush reelect campaign, or the Republican Party generally?

ROZELL: No, I don't think it was completely independent of those. I think that there was a well coordinated strategy to get these ballot initiatives in a certain number of



states, and to raise the profile of this issue, because of the potential impact that it could have on the presidential race, as well as the congressional [00:38:00] elections that year. So I don't think that was completely independent of those other considerations.

NELSON: Democrats nominate a Roman Catholic for president in 2004.

ROZELL: Right.

NELSON: John Kerry.

ROZELL: Yes.

NELSON: The first since JFK in 1960, who got, I think close to 80 percent of the Catholic vote in that year. What happened to the Catholic vote in 2004?

ROZELL: They went for Bush, yeah.

NELSON: How do you explain that?

ROZELL: Well, image is reality in American politics for many voters, right? So, John Kerry, who had been a seminary student, a lifelong Catholic, survey data that were taken that year suggested that most Americans did not see him as a man of deep religious faith. [00:39:00] There was one national survey, I think it was a *TIME Magazine* one, that asked is George W. Bush or is John Kerry a man of deep religious faith, and I think 7 percent said yes for John Kerry. In other survey, Americans asked in the election cycle, what's the most important thing in having a president, you know a person of strong moral character came out number one. We know that on election day, there was that controversial question in the exit polls about moral values, so there were I think six different categories of different voting criteria that voters were asked to rank as what was most important in their voting decision, whether it was the economy, security, [00:40:00] employment, moral values was one, and that came out on top there. So I think it was devastating to Kerry's campaign, that there was this perception that he was not a man of deep religious faith.

You can look at the Pew survey data and data produced by other polling organizations, that showcase that overwhelmingly, Americans want the president to be a person of strong religious faith. Even non-religious Americans tend to say that they would prefer a person of strong religious faith. Maybe that's a marker of character or an indicator that people think, this is someone who's at least trying to think deeply about life and death issues, when a president has to make these kinds of big decisions. This matters to American voters and the numbers in these surveys are overwhelming, and so to have a major party [00:41:00] presidential candidate who's perceived by the vast



majority of the American public, as not a person of deep religious faith, I think is still highly problematic.

NELSON: Did people, in 1960, think that JFK was a person of deep religious faith?

ROZELL: Well, that's a good question. I don't think it mattered as much actually, and in 1960, you know my parents' generation, right? People could ask them you know, how do you think the Catholics will vote or how will the Protestants vote in this election, how will the Jewish vote, you know all always Democratic, the Catholic vote, always Democratic. You had religious affiliation as an identifier for political party preference for many religious Americans, but by the time of the 2004 election, even before that, [00:42:00] it's not whether you're Catholic or Protestant, for example, it's how religiously observant you are.

And so you asked about the Catholic vote and what happened, John Kerry is the Catholic candidate, first since 1960, he loses the Catholic vote to George W. Bush. Kerry overwhelmingly lost among white, regular churchgoing Catholics. Among those who are most likely to vote on the basis of moral, social issues, he lost, and he lost because his positions on the issues that those voters care about very deeply were wrong. So they will vote for a Methodist who is a proud pro-lifer and is going to support the policies that they believe are morally correct, and not vote for a fellow Catholic who takes the wrong policy positions, it's that simple.

NELSON: We will come back to the moral values [00:43:00] item in the exit poll, but while we're on this line, something you've written about, I notice, that whereas one time, in fact as recently as 1960, where white Christian conservatives regarded the Roman Catholic Church as somewhere between awful and demonic.

ROZELL: Right.

NELSON: By 2004, before 2004, there's been an alliance formed between white evangelical Christians and certainly the Roman Catholic hierarchy.

ROZELL: That's right.

NELSON: And, as you say, observant Catholics.

ROZELL: Yes.

NELSON: How did that alliance get forged, because it ran so much against the historical relationship between evangelicals and Catholics.

ROZELL: Yeah, yeah, that's exactly right, and that, I think is one of the most important transformations that took place in American politics, [00:44:00] that led to the increased influence and power of the religious conservative movement; the ability of evangelical Protestants and Catholics to come together. You know,

churchgoing conflicts, I should say, to come together in politics, which they had not been able to do for many years. In one of my earlier books, I trace the story of the deep disconnect between those two groups politically, to the point where, before *Roe v. Wade*, in some states where there were legislative proposals to restrict abortion rights, you had evangelical Protestants actually opposing these measures that had been introduced by Catholic legislators, because they're afraid that the Catholic Church influence and power in government, would start to take over. [00:45:00] Can you imagine, even conservative evangelicals going against any anti-abortion rights or pro-life measure today? Of course not.

So, the evangelicals and Catholics coming together, created, I think, a very powerful alliance. There are a number of important leaders in those communities who started getting together and talking with each other about what a powerfully important role they can play in American politics, if they could put aside the question of who's going to find heaven, and simply focus on common political goals and objectives. They started meeting and meeting, and really talking very openly among their supporters, about the need to do outreach. One of the criticisms of the old Moral Majority, was that they did a terrible job of reaching outside [00:46:00] the Bible Baptist Fellowship and other religious groups that formed sort of the core of the national organization and of its followers, and that many of its leaders had been openly intolerant of Catholics, for example. So, the Christian Coalition, its, I think singular, most important contribution for the religious right movement, was its message that this is an open organization that reaches across different religious groups and invites everyone who supports a pro-life, pro-traditional families agenda. They were very careful to put on their board, people of different religious faiths. Ralph Reed used to brag about this very openly, you know how many Catholics he had in his organization and they had their own [00:47:00] Catholic outreach arm of the Christian Coalition.

I think that was, as you say, an important transformation that took place, that made it possible for religious conservatives who could agree on policy and could agree to support candidates who supported policies they agree with, to work together and become a much more powerful influence in politics, and simply not discuss when they get together, their religious beliefs differences.

NELSON: I wonder too, what you think about the influence of Pope John Paul II, I guess in two ways. One is because of his staunch anticommunism, he was probably the



least objectionable pope to many evangelical Christians in history. But beyond that, he's appointing the kind of bishops and cardinals in the United States, who frankly gave John Kerry a hard time [00:48:00] in 2004.

ROZELL: That's right, yeah that's exactly right. John Paul II was powerfully important as an influence in bringing together the Catholics and evangelicals in American politics. Not that he was in any way directing that or involved in any way in American politics, but white conservative evangelicals came to adore the Catholic Pope. They referred to him as the evangelical pope, and in some of the evangelical colleges, they started teaching classes on the theology of John Paul II. What an amazing transformation, going back to your earlier question. Can you imagine that, back in 1960, having happened? So, there was an enormous fondness for the Catholic Pope, and I think you're right, his strong anticommunism of course, the influence that he had, that they believed that he had at least, [00:49:00] in bringing down the old Soviet Union. The fact that he was appointing bishops who were strongly pro-life of course, but also very open about how people in public life have to be consistent in their positions on the life issues. What came to be known at that time, the language that became popular, the non-negotiable issues, that there were certain issues that you simply can't compromise on in politics. And so evangelicals saw John Paul as someone who, unlike the more progressive Catholics, who might have hoped for a different pope than John Paul II, who may be happy now, right? [00:50:00] That there can be no compromise on these issues. That was a powerful signal, and then as you point out correctly, a number of the American bishops publicly said, for example, "If John Kerry came into my church, I would not let him take communion." And they advised priests not to let John Kerry, or -- and in some cases, even if someone is openly a supporter of John Kerry.

Now, a lot of that backfired, by the way, politically, I should point out, because the vast majority of American Catholics don't want to be directed in such a fashion, by the bishops, in political campaigns. They feel that's highly inappropriate. So, I don't think that's signaling actually had a big impact in shifting the votes of Catholics in the 2004 election, [00:51:00] but it did create, I think a political problem for John Kerry, as the so-called Catholic candidate and the first since 1960, that there were American bishops who were saying, I wouldn't even give communion to this guy.

NELSON: Fascinating, some might say factoid, but I'll just say fact, in your book, *The Values Campaign*, the poll--and this again, brings back to mind, things that were



enormously significant culturally at the time--half of Bush's supporters said they had seen the film, *The Passion of the Christ*, the Mel Gibson film, which was so controversial. Half of Bush supporters, only 15 percent of Kerry supporters. What does that signify?

ROZELL: The cultural divide, right? The other factoid in there was almost all of Kerry's supporters said they had seen the Michael Moore film, *Fahrenheit 9/11*, and only 3 percent of Bush supporters said, or at least admitted, [00:52:00] that they had ever seen that film. So this of course was a time when Americans were really starting to latch on to this message of red versus blue America, that we're a divided country now, right? Almost like we're two different countries. You have this group of Americans here who adore Mel Gibson's film and they want to show their support for it, and they turn out in droves and they vote for Bush. And this group of Americans who find this somehow offensive, and they're not going to go see that movie, and they're all voting for the other candidate. So even in popular culture, right? I mean, you can find how much of a difference there exists and how these kind of beliefs line up politically as well, that you can predict a Bush voter based on what movies that person liked, or a Kerry voter based on [00:53:00] what popular culture that person happens to like.

NELSON: Finally, the exit poll. Not finally in our interview but finally, we're getting around to something we've both referred to: the exit poll question in 2004, "What is the one issue that mattered the most to you?" And as you pointed out, there were six alternatives, most of them sort of traditionally important political things, and then "moral values," which more people chose than any of the others.

ROZELL: Right.

NELSON: First of all, why was that question controversial in terms of how people interpreted the meaning, and then what do you think the meaning was of it ranking first?

ROZELL: So, among the six questions, that one came out number one, and the immediate analysis that came out of the election was that those were Bush voters. [00:54:00] Those were people who were concerned primarily about the gay marriage initiatives, the referenda in the various states, as well as abortion, and this signified the incredible power of the religious conservative movement in American politics. They elevated moral issues to the top of concerns of election criteria that voters relied upon in that campaign cycle, and they turned out powerfully for Bush. Now, you ask why was that controversial, the phrase moral values is rather amorphous; it means different things to different people. So, my more progressive leaning friends who study these issues say well, I could have

said moral values is important because I think it's morally wrong that there's too many guns in America, or it's morally wrong that there's too much poverty, and moral values, that's what that means to me and we need to be [00:55:00] doing something about those issues, and those are more important to me than whether we're in a recession or not. The security issue, yeah that's important, but I feel safe right now, so I'm going to say moral issues. There's no way for us to discern how many people who said moral issues is most important may have been projecting their preference on issues, unrelated to what religious conservatives care about the most, but I think it's a safe assumption, when you look at the exit polling data and the percentage of people who chose moral values and voted for George Bush, that these were indeed the evangelical and born again social conservatives.

NELSON: You said in your book, 80 percent of those who chose moral values voted for Bush.

ROZELL: Voted for Bush, so there you go, right there.

NELSON: That sort of seems to settle that.

ROZELL: I think that settles it, yeah.

NELSON: I'd like to turn -- because [00:56:00] you've written about so many different aspects of contemporary American politics, -- to the Bush campaign in connection with other elections that were going on in 2004, and preface this by saying almost always, in the post-World War II era, in fact always, until 2004, when a president has been reelected--Eisenhower, Nixon, Clinton, Reagan--when the president has been reelected, his party actually lost seats in the Senate elections.

ROZELL: That's right.

NELSON: Even though most of those elections are just national landslides for the president. In 2004, the result was different, and we'll talk about the result in a minute, but do you think the strategy was different? In other words, do you think that Bush actively saw his reelection as one that should have direct consequences for the congressional elections? [00:57:00]

ROZELL: Yeah, I think he did. I think he wanted a broad based party victory. He did not want to go into his second term politically weakened, as other reelected presidents have, by bigger numbers for the opposition party in the Congress. Although he had projected himself as he said, a uniter, not a divider, and a bipartisan style leader, when he talked about his leadership as Governor of Texas, he was a highly partisan leader who relied upon partisan majorities in Congress, on most of the policy initiatives that he cared about, once he became

president. He didn't really see a bipartisan vehicle for moving much of his agenda through, so he needed his victory to be a party victory, not just a Bush victory, right? We had discussed earlier, that Nixon had a lonely victory for reelection in 1972.

NELSON: And Reagan. [00:58:00]

ROZELL: And Reagan too, that's right. Nixon never used the word Republican, if I recall, when he ran for reelection in 1972. It was about himself. So I think Bush learned a lesson from history in that regard, that the presidential victory is much more meaningful if the president can go into his second term in a much more strengthened position. You know the history of second term presidencies, right? That they have not been all entirely successful, to put it mildly. And so I think Bush did indeed want to be strengthened going into his second term, so he could make a big push on a number of issues. Remember his response after he won the election. I don't remember the exact date that he said this but he said, "I now have political capital and I'm going to spend it." He was saying, this was a broad partisan based, [00:59:00] you know party based victory, not just for himself, but for the Republicans, and he had won political capital by this time, winning a majority of the vote handily, but also by bringing more Republicans in. The consensus view, among many observers, as you remember, immediately after that election, was that he had a free hand to do what he wants in policy, beginning early in 2005, he was unstoppable.

NELSON: And we'll get to that in just a minute, but I wonder, what is it that Bush did differently or had his organization do differently in 2004, to bring about that desired result?

ROZELL: Right. Well, I think there was a greater effort to connect with other campaigns, Senate campaigns, that Bush was not running completely separate from people who are running down-ticket. So there was a lot of coordination going on between [01:00:00] the presidential campaign effort and the legislative races in the House, and especially the Senate. The President was out there campaigning with candidates who were running in open seats, for example, in a number of states, and I think he was directing a lot of resources to states where he could make a difference potentially, to the outcome not only of his numbers in the Electoral College, but also for a number of candidates who needed a boost in the election.

NELSON: And the real gains in the Senate that year, came in the region that you and Charles Bullock have published a book on, updated pretty much every four years,



The New Politics of the Old South. The gains--five Democratically held open seats in the South. The Republicans [01:01:00] won all five.

ROZELL: Right. I'm not remembering the numbers, I apologize, but I believe that Bush ran behind a number of those Republicans who ran in the open seats? In other words, there was a coattails effect for sure, but there was somewhat, perhaps a reverse coattails effect too that, you know, Republican candidates who did very well in the statewide races in the southern states, along with the referenda, anti-gay marriage referenda in a number of states, these were all vehicles for boosting the conservative Republican turnout that had the effect of also helping the Bush campaign.

NELSON: The election, as you say, allows Bush to claim, I've got political capital. [01:02:00] The political capital to do what? Because as we know, none of his second term legislative initiatives, major ones at least, really went very far.

ROZELL: Right, yeah, well that's exactly right. I think it's well acknowledged that he made a very big mistake starting his second term with Social Security reform. It had not been a key issue in the 2004 election cycle and yet again, the religious conservatives in the Republican Party, who had been told time and again, when a Republican is elected, wait your turn, your issues will come later, we need to work on the economy, we need to work on these other issues first, we don't want to get into the divisive issues. They were ready in early 2005. They felt that was their time, and then to see Social Security reform go to the front of the agenda, I think deeply disappointed [01:03:00] some of the key groups of Bush's own electoral constituency, who did not feel very strongly on that issue and in many cases were not supportive of the President on that issue. That puzzled many political observers, why he put that issue out there as the one that would frame this sort of honeymoon period of his second term. I think it's well acknowledged, that was a big mistake.

NELSON: It's not something he really talked about in the reelection campaign. Was it?

ROZELL: That's right. No, it wasn't. He didn't talk about that issue in the campaign very much at all. He did mention occasionally, about giving people more control over their retirement money, but it wasn't so specific. And then I think once, as you know, people saw some of the details and heard some analyses of what this would mean, to privatize [01:04:00] even a portion of the Social Security funds, and having that followed by, a couple years later, some real trouble in the stock market, of course killed the issue in American politics, I think for a very, very long time.



- NELSON: We've been talking a lot about domestic/moral issues. A lot of people look at the 2004 election and say it was really a national security election.
- ROZELL: Right.
- NELSON: Bush got reelected because of the war on terror, and Kerry came as close as he did because of declining support for the war in Iraq, and that was really what the election was about. How does that analysis square with what we've been talking about?
- ROZELL: Well, that was a key issue in the election, no doubt about it, and given the closeness of the election, right, a hundred-thirty-thousand votes in one big state, [01:05:00] one can claim a number of different issues were decisive in the election. You had mentioned before, the Catholic voters, and that Bush won the Catholic vote. His margin among Catholics in Ohio was bigger than his statewide margin. So you could say the Catholic vote was the key to his victory, you could say security issues were the key to his victory, because that was, I believe second, on the list of those six topical areas in the exit poll, close behind moral values. Bush did very well, I recall, with those who said that security issues were paramount in their voting decision. There was the bin Laden tape of course, just a few days before the election, which I think probably, although it was meant to tweak Bush, probably helped him. Yeah. [01:06:00]
- NELSON: Bush was, as you point out, in *The Values Campaign*, Bush was one of a series of presidents, starting with Carter, from southern states. I mean, all but who in that period? Reagan.
- ROZELL: Right.
- NELSON: Were southerners. What do you make of that?
- ROZELL: Yeah. Well, the South of course, is absolutely key in the Electoral College, as you know. What was once the solid Democratic South of course, has become a much more Republican-leaning region of the country, and I think Democrats recognize for sure, that holding down their losses in the South is absolutely key to winning the presidency. It used to be said that winning the South was key for Democrats, but Bill Clinton and Al Gore [01:07:00] proved that wrong. They proved that for a Democrat, the ticket just has to hold down its losses in the South, in order to get the 270 or better in the Electoral College. So it is, I think, very important that the party be able to appeal to southern voters, however it may do so. Of course, some felt that Barack Obama would not be able to appeal to voters in the South, but again, he was able to hold down the party's losses in that region of the country, due to I think more demographic shifting that has taken place over the past decade in sort of the border-area South states, as opposed to the deeper

South states, you know Virginia and North Carolina, which have become most prominently more two-party competitive states. [01:08:00] Virginia used to be the most Republican voting state in the country in presidential election campaigns and now it's turned blue in two election cycles.

NELSON: Was Kerry just premature in choosing a North Carolinian as his running mate; John Edwards, in 2004?

ROZELL: It didn't work. Yeah, I mean the mere identity of being a southerner is not enough. If the policy positions, if the ticket is perceived politically, socially, culturally, as out of step with the values of the southern voters, it doesn't matter that there's a southern man on the ticket. That was a miscalculation.

NELSON: What made it a miscalculation?

ROZELL: I think the assumption that you put a southerner on the ticket, you're going to win southern states, and it just doesn't work that way.

NELSON: One last question, and this ties back into the [01:09:00] religion in politics area. In the ten-plus years now, since 2004, how has the Christian right's agenda, influence, evolved? You hear a lot of talk now, about the secular voters as a growth sector, especially among younger voters, who really don't want religion in politics. If you can just talk about how things have evolved in the subject you've studied.

ROZELL: Yeah, yeah, so before we went on camera, we were talking, and I had mentioned how it's only just over a decade ago, and yet it feels so long ago, to be talking about the 2004 elections. For someone such as myself, who studies the role of the religious right and moral values in American politics, so here we are today, talking about an election campaign not that long ago, when there were ballot initiatives in 13 states, against gay marriage, [01:10:00] and these ballot initiatives passed by overwhelming majorities in every single state. So, the vast majority of Americans back then, 2004, again not that long ago, against gay marriage, right? And even going into 2008, right? Barack Obama could not come out in favor of gay marriage, and he talks about how his position is evolving. The change in American public opinion on that issue has just been so profound, so deep, and has happened so rapidly in the past several years, that we're talking about a very different political environment in many ways, on the social and cultural issues.

I'm a father of two, a young adult, 20 years of age, and teenagers as well, they are deeply puzzled that these issues were so prominent ten years ago. If I talk about the research I did back in the '04 [01:11:00] campaign. What's it matter?



I've got friends who are gay, they're in relationships, they're good people. You look at the generational differences on these issues and they're profound. The younger generation, so what, these shouldn't even be issues any more in American politics. That's the direction we're heading, and with generational replacement, I think there is a profound shifting going on in the electorate. So, it's fascinating to me that merely ten years ago, our mindset in writing this book was how strong the Christian right remains as an influencer in American national politics and at the grassroots in many parts of the country, because of their ability to mobilize over the gay marriage issue, and how they were able [01:12:00] strategically, very effectively, to use that issue as a ballot measure to drive up Republican voting, and help Republican candidates across the ticket at that time. It's not going to work that way any more, so I think the religious right movement is at a crossroads now, as an influencer in American politics. They are still deeply powerful and important within the Republican Party, and so you see Republican Party aspirants for the presidency who are saying they don't believe in or they're not sure about the theory of evolution. And they're taking as strongly, or almost as stridently anti-gay marriage positions in many cases, as was the case ten years ago, because they know that white evangelical core of the Republican Party is still actively mobilized within the party and is going to make a big difference in the primaries. [01:13:00]

But ultimately, I think this is a big, big problem for the Republicans, going into general elections, the kind of positions that the candidates take in order to appeal to these constituencies who are so key to the primaries and caucuses, that will reverberate in the general election campaigns. So, are we going to go back to a period where the Republicans start signaling to the religious conservative leaders once again, back off. You know where we are on the issues you care about, but we can't be too open about these and we have to speak a different language now, so as not to offend secular voters. I think you're going to see Republican candidates more and more talking about, as some have already, I've attended a friend's gay marriage and I have a relative who's gay and I support that person. I still believe in the traditional family as the bedrock of American society, but [01:14:00] what some of us have called gay-bashing and opportunistic use of a hot-button issue in American politics ten years ago, to ratchet up support and fire up the base, I don't think that's going to be viable any more going forward. I think the rhetoric that surrounds these issues and the



public presentation by candidates now has to change to reflect the profound changes that have taken place in the American electorate on these issues.

NELSON: I guess as an interesting footnote. In 2004, Vice President Cheney's daughter openly in a same sex relationship. Both Edwards and Kerry found ways to refer to her in the debate.

ROZELL: That was terrible, yes. That was terrible on their part, yeah.

NELSON: Was that just ham-handedness on their part?

ROZELL: I think it was. I would say [01:15:00] it's even worse if they had thought about it ahead of time and had done that, having thought about it, that it might be a good political tactic. I remember very well, Dick Cheney saying, "I am one mad father." That resonated with people, you know you don't touch my family.

NELSON: Even though on the face of it, Kerry and Edwards were saying oh, this shows, you know, why being tolerant of these relationships is a good thing.

ROZELL: That's right.

NELSON: Look, even Vice President Cheney has one.

ROZELL: Yes, that's right.

NELSON: So one issue, I think, on which he publicly disagreed with President Bush, freedom is freedom for everyone was his shorthanded way of saying same sex marriage ought to be okay.

ROZELL: That's right.

NELSON: Nobody thinks of Cheney as being kind of the man of the future, but in 2004, on that issue, I guess he was.

ROZELL: Well, family is a powerful influencer on people's beliefs and [01:16:00] yeah, and if it's personal, I think that makes a big difference. In Dick Cheney's case, as is the case with so many Americans, what changes people? That they know someone that's a good person. You know, my next door neighbor for many years, two women in a relationship, and there was one family across the street, the father was an absentee and these ladies were taking care of the kids. These are the people who did the Easter egg roll in the neighborhood every year, the kids all got together and everybody adored these people. You know, so how can you say anything against people when you know them and they're with your kids and they're helping your kids, or they're part of your family. That's what changes people. I think over time, as I've been talking about the profound change in American public opinion, [01:17:00] as it becomes more clear to gay and lesbian Americans, that they can be out in the open unashamedly and feel that they have communities of support and they're accepted, more people are having



those kinds of interactions; finding out that this person I've known for years is gay. Again, that changes more people over time.

NELSON: So if you were to do a book now called *The Values Campaign*, it might have an entirely different content.

ROZELL: I think, yeah, yeah, the word values would have an entirely different meaning now, from what it did just ten years ago. Again, just remarkable to me, what a profound change we've gone through in just a little over a decade.

NELSON: Well, thank you so much for your gift of insight, Mark Rozell.

ROZELL: Thank you, Michael, yes, appreciate it.

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