

## **US Campaign 2000: Of Pregnant Chads, Butterfly Ballots and Partisan Vitriol**

THE EXTRAORDINARY OUTCOME OF THE 2000 US PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION has generated serious concerns that promise to have long-term consequences for the political process. No major institution of government remains untouched. The flawed count in Florida, and multiple problems of electoral administration at county and municipal levels, with accusations of chicanery and vote-stealing, serve to undermine the legitimacy and authority of the presidential office, as well as public confidence in the fairness of the result. The role of the courts in interpreting and shaping the outcome has drawn them deeply into the electoral process and created potential conflicts between legislative and judicial branches. The closeness of the eventual outcome in the Senate and House, along with the intense vitriol and bitterness of partisan wrangling, can be expected to exacerbate problems of policy gridlock that were already evident in the post-impeachment do-nothing Congress. The contrast between the popular vote and the Electoral College vote raises fundamental questions about the electoral system, designed in the eighteenth century and used nowhere else in the world, although probably fixed in constitutional granite in America. The news media lost credibility by election night coverage, calling Florida first for Gore, then for Bush, before finally admitting that the state was too close to call. And endemic problems of campaigns awash with dollars, with the total costs ballooning this year to an estimated \$3 billion, serve to corrode the process further.<sup>1</sup> Many elections are hyped as extraordinary, but a contest in which the first lady, Hillary Rodham Clinton, was returned as Senator for New York, in which a dead

<sup>1</sup> This estimate includes the money spent on the presidential and congressional races, including funds spent by outside groups that do not declare their spending. The biggest increase came from soft money collected by both parties' congressional committees. Ruth Marcus, 'Costliest Race in US History Nears End', *Washington Post*, 6 November 2000, p. A01.

man was elected to the Senate in Missouri,<sup>2</sup> and above all in which the outcome of the presidential election remained uncertain into December because it all rested on a 193 Bush-vote lead and whether a few hundred dimpled chads in south Florida did or did not represent the will of the voter, certainly deserves the label. As President Clinton remarked in the immediate aftermath, the people had spoken, but it is not entirely clear what they had to say.

To understand this remarkable phenomenon, the first part of this article summarizes the underlying conditions leading up to the election, then the second part examines trends in candidate campaigns, media coverage and public attention during the worthy but dull year-long campaign running from the snows of Iowa to the sunshine state in Thanksgiving. Finally, the third part reflects on the possible consequences that may arise from the blockbuster outcome, which proved anything but dull.

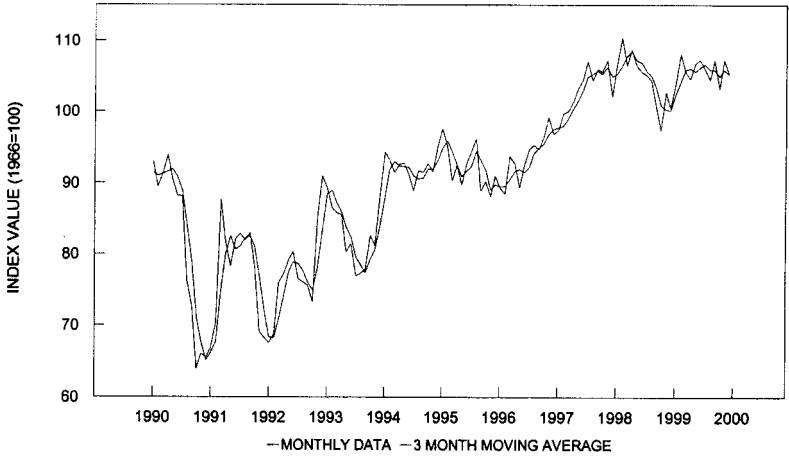
#### UNDERLYING CONDITIONS: AMERICAN PEACE AND PROSPERITY

Exit pollsters and the designers of Votomatic machines were not the only ones to take a hit in this campaign; proponents of economic voting models were also left with some explaining to do. If the public was moved by retrospective evaluations of government performance, the underlying economic and social conditions that America enjoyed during the Clinton years, with peace abroad and prosperity at home, should certainly have set the stage for a safe Democratic victory.<sup>3</sup> Economic models published by political scientists during the spring and summer uniformly pointed in this direction, with predictions

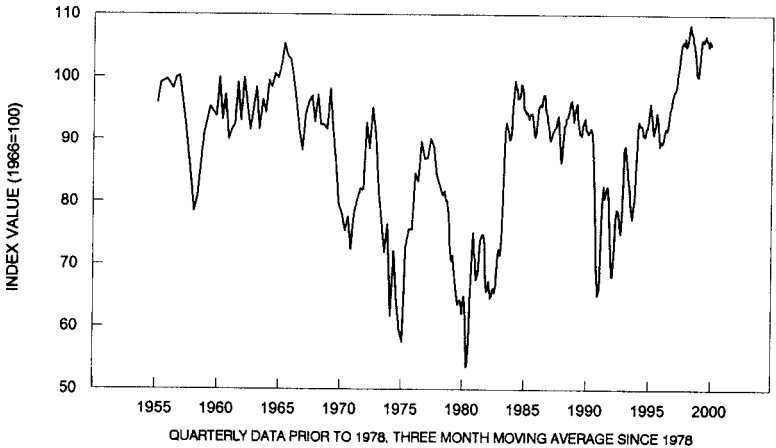
<sup>2</sup> Governor Mel Carnahan died in a plane crash on 16 October yet he remained on the ballot and won the Missouri US Senate race.

<sup>3</sup> For a balanced assessment of the President's policy performance see Colin Campbell and Bert A. Rockman (eds), *The Clinton Legacy*, New York, Chatham House Publishers/Seven Bridges Press, 2000.

**Figure 1**  
*Chart 1 – Recent Changes*  
*The Index of Consumer Sentiment*



*Chart 2 – Historical Series*  
*The Index of Consumer Sentiment*



Source: <http://athena.sca.isr.umich.edu/scripts/contents.asp>  
 University of Michigan Survey of Consumers

estimating that the share of the popular vote would be anywhere from 53–60 per cent in favour of Al Gore over George Bush.<sup>4</sup>

The long-term context of campaign 2000 was established by America's longest post-war economic boom and the deeply ambivalent feelings generated in the public by President Clinton. Perhaps the clearest illustration of the sunny public mood is given in Figure 1, which illustrates patterns of consumer confidence, as measured by the University of Michigan series with quarterly data from 1955 and three-month moving averages since 1978. During the early 1990s the index sees a roller-coaster pattern of peaks and troughs, with a steep dip preceding Clinton's victory over Bush in 1992. From 1994, however, the pattern is a steady plateau followed by a rise in consumer confidence. Steady growth, the reduction in the federal deficit, the lowest misery index (combining unemployment and inflation) for thirty years, the creation of more than 20 million new jobs since Clinton took office, and above all the buoyant Dow Jones and Nasdaq, were reflected in public satisfaction with the good-time economy.<sup>5</sup> Seen in historical perspective, in 1998 consumer confidence reached its highest point since the Michigan series started in the mid-1950s, even beating Reagan's 'Morning Again in America' boom-time. This pattern generated considerable speculation that the revolution in information and communication technologies had increased productivity to such an extent that a new economy broke the old rules of boom and bust.<sup>6</sup> Many credited

<sup>4</sup> For a review of the forecasts see Robert Kaiser, 'Is This Any Way to Pick a Winner?', *Washington Post*, PA01. The estimates made at the September annual meeting, 26 May 2000, of the American Political Science Association were 52.8% (James Campbell, University of Buffalo), 52.9% (Brad Lockerbie, University of Georgia), 53.2% (Alan Abramowitz Emory University), 55% (Helmut Norpoth, SUNY), 55.2% (Christopher Wlezian, University of Houston) and 60.3% (Thomas Holbrook, University of Wisconsin). In mid-October Michael Lewis-Beck and Charles Tien forecast that, based on presidential popularity, the percentage change in GNP, and a peace and prosperity index, Al Gore would get 55.4% of the popular vote, and that the Democrats would regain the House and the Senate. <http://Urban.hunter.cuny.edu/~ctien/> For a critical review of the economic models and replies see Karl Eisenhower and Pete Nelson, 'The Phony Science of Predicting Elections', *Slate*, 20 May 2000. <http://slate.msn.com/Features/forecast.asp>

<sup>5</sup> For details see Joint Economic Committee and the Council for Economic Advisers, *Economic Indicators*, US Government Printing Office, Washington DC, 2000.

<sup>6</sup> See, for example, US Department of Commerce, *The Emerging Digital Economy*, US Department of Commerce, Washington DC, 1999. <http://www.ecommerce.gov/ede>.

Alan Greenspan with America's longest post-war period of prosperity, but Clinton and his team of economic advisers probably deserve some of the praise as well.<sup>7</sup>

Other domestic concerns also diminished during these years, notably the dramatically declining crime rate in many urban areas, along with a reduction in the crack epidemic that had plagued the inner cities. During the long campaign, Gallup polls asking open-ended questions about the 'most important problem facing the country today', found no outstanding matters on the public agenda. The only issues to rise into double digits were education, ethics/moral decline, health care, and crime/violence, in that order.<sup>8</sup>

Abroad during Clinton's second term there were major conflicts affecting American interests, notably the unresolved Middle East peace process, involvement of US troops in the peace-keeping operation in Bosnia, Haiti, Somalia, Iraq, Afghanistan, Sudan and Kosovo, and ongoing tensions elsewhere such as Chechnya, Northern Ireland and Colombia. Lacking a grand vision in the complex post-cold war world, the Clinton legacy has been seen as one of flexible intervention in short-term events, within a broader strategy of democratic enlargement among developing nations facing the challenge of economic development, ethnic conflict and political stability.<sup>9</sup> For most Americans, however, overseas events usually seemed distant and aroused little interest. In Gallup polls asking the public about the 'most important problem facing the country today', during the long campaign only 4 per cent ever mentioned international issues or foreign affairs.<sup>10</sup> The end of the cold war and the process of globalization produced difficult challenges of conflict-resolution and human rights, of international terrorism and civil wars, and of global warming and world trade (where 'dollar diplomacy' often plays a larger role than military hardware) but the

<sup>7</sup> Bob Woodward, *Maestro: Greenspan's Fed and the American Boom*, New York, 2000.

<sup>8</sup> The Gallup Organization, Princeton. Polls from 14–15 September 1999 to 6–9 October 2000. [www.gallup.com/poll](http://www.gallup.com/poll)

<sup>9</sup> For an assessment of Clinton's foreign policy see Emily O. Goldman and Larry Berman, 'Engaging the World: First Impressions of the Clinton Foreign Policy Legacy', in Colin Campbell and Bert A. Rockman (eds), *The Clinton Legacy*, New York, Chatham House Publishers/Seven Bridges Press, 2000.

<sup>10</sup> The Gallup Organization, Princeton, Polls from September 14–15 1999 to October 6–9 2000. [www.gallup.com/poll](http://www.gallup.com/poll)

very complexity of these issues meant that few voters paid close attention.

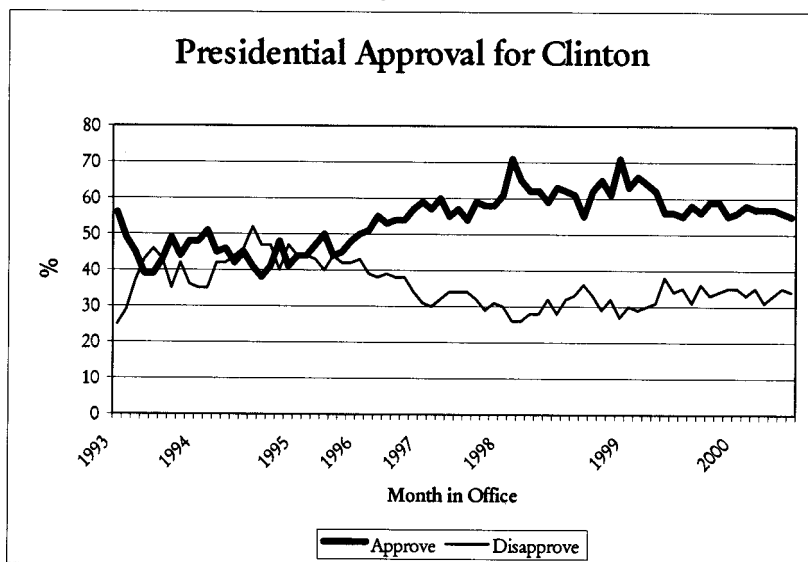
## PRESIDENTIAL POPULARITY

With America fat and happy, and without any major foreign policy crisis on the immediate horizon, not surprisingly the public gave President Clinton high marks for his performance in office although drawing a clear distinction between the man and the job. As shown in Figure 2, President Clinton's honeymoon extended from his inauguration in January 1993 to the mid-term elections in November 1994. In these years the administration followed a mix of new Democrat centrism on matters like balanced deficit reduction with old-style Democrat liberalism like the Family and Medical Leave Act, the gun control Brady bill, and motor voter registration. His popularity was damaged at an early stage by rows about gays in the military and later by the failure of the over-ambitious 1994 health care reform proposals. A series of well-publicized so-called 'scandals' also hurt Clinton's popularity, including Whitewater, Travelgate and the suicide of Vincent Foster, although House zealots who pursued each of these stories eventually found no grounds for prosecution.

The period after the 1994 mid-term elections produced a steady rise in presidential popularity until by the 1996 campaign about two-thirds of the public approved of President Clinton's performance. This pattern reflected the gradual improvement in the economy, along with a public reaction against the Gingrich 'Contract with America' ideological 'revolution' among House Republican true-believers. Clinton remained popular until February 1998, with the eruption of the Monica Lewinsky scandal. After that date, support for his performance remained relatively high although the public became far more critical in their evaluations of his personal qualities. This pattern persisted as the scandal culminated in the impeachment inquiry and the Senate trial, and during the final 'lame duck' era characterized by a weakened presidency and legislative stalemate in Congress. In the November 2000 elections, the final VNS exit poll<sup>11</sup> reported that 57 per cent of voters expressed

<sup>11</sup> The Voter News Service exit poll was conducted by questionnaires completed by 13,279 voters leaving 300 polling places around the nation on election day. For details see [www.cnn.com/ELECTION/2000/wpolls/US/P000.html](http://www.cnn.com/ELECTION/2000/wpolls/US/P000.html)

Figure 2



*Note: Q.1 'Do you approve or disapprove of the way Bill Clinton is handling his job as President?' [IF DK ENTER AS DK. IF DEPENDS PROBE ONCE WITH: 'Overall do you approve or disapprove of the way Bill Clinton is handling his job as President?' IF STILL DEPENDS ENTER AS DK]*

*Source: The Pew Research Center on the People and the Press, November 2000.*

approval of President Clinton's performance in office, although at the same time 60 per cent had an unfavourable view of him as a person, following the Lewinsky affair and the impeachment proceedings. In the exit poll, more than one third of voters (35 per cent) said that they approved of how Clinton handled his job and they also liked him as a person, and of this group 85 per cent supported Gore. Another fifth (20 per cent) approved of his job performance but disliked him personally, of whom two-thirds voted for Gore. Lastly, 39 per cent disapproved of Clinton's performance and disliked him as a person, and 89 per cent of this group supported Bush.<sup>12</sup> To the intense anger and moral outrage of the GOP, and perhaps their self-righteous mystification, no matter what flaws were

<sup>12</sup> It should be noted that only 1% disapproved of Clinton's performance but liked the man.

apparent in his character, the American public drew a clear line between personal flaws and presidential performance.

For comparison with post-war presidencies, in Gallup polls Clinton's average ratings during his whole term of office registered 54 per cent approval. This figure was similar to the average ratings for Reagan (53 per cent) and Johnson (55 per cent), and better than Nixon (49 per cent), Ford (47 per cent) and Carter (45 per cent), although behind Bush (61 per cent), Eisenhower (65 per cent) and Kennedy (70 per cent). Even at their nadir (37 per cent), Clinton's approval ratings were better than the lowest point of all previous presidencies other than the ever-popular Ike and the short-lived years of the Kennedy administration.<sup>13</sup>

The impact of the Clinton legacy and the era of peace and prosperity set the tone for a strangely issue-less campaign 2000, where few candidates could gain traction in mobilizing the public through grand visions and schemes. Lacking big issues on the policy agenda, and with no stomach to return to the ideological infighting and red-meat party divisions produced by the 1980s Cuomo/Jackson left or the 1990s Gingrich right, debate throughout campaign 2000 seemed to revolve around detailed matters concerning which party would be more competent at managing social security or educational standards, health care or the budget deficit. Policy options appeared to be painted in alternative shades of beige. Voting models in political science therefore predicted a strong vote for the Democrats based on policy performance and presidential popularity, but only if Clinton and Gore were given credit for the good times, rather than the Fed, or even the global economy and the Nasdaq 500.

## THE CAMPAIGN

In the light of these trends, as the Iowa caucus approached on 24 January, most estimates favoured the return of a Democratic candidate to the White House. Moreover in Vice-President Al Gore, the party had an experienced leader and an energetic and hard-working campaigner, who should have been able to draw on all of the credit for the good times of the Clinton years while sharing

<sup>13</sup> The Gallup Organization, Princeton, *Overall Presidential Approval Ratings 1953–1999*, [www.gallup.com/poll/trends/ptjobapp.asp](http://www.gallup.com/poll/trends/ptjobapp.asp)



none of the personal problems that afflicted the President. With his prior record in the Senate, as well as his active role at the heart of the administration as Vice-President, his strong reputation as a debater, and his obvious thorough, policy-wonkish, grasp of the issues, Al Gore appeared to many challengers in his own party as an unbeatable candidate. Early on, potential rivals such as Dick Gephart decided not to enter the field. Yet the quixotic Bill Bradley, Senator for New Jersey and former baseball star, was not deterred from running an insurgent campaign from the left, challenging the 'third way' centrist New Democrat appeal of the Clintonite wing of the party. While much of Middle America had benefited from the Nasdaq years – personal disposable incomes were up and the poverty rate dropped by one per cent from 1993 to 1998 – many others felt that they had been left out of the new prosperity. Continued dissatisfaction with welfare reforms, education and health care strengthened a Democratic constituency receptive to a return to old-fashioned liberalism for working families.

Meanwhile early on the Republicans were determined to learn the lessons of the failure of the Gingrich revolution, and, fired up by their failure to impeach Clinton, and the failed presidential campaigns of 1992 and 1996, they sought a winning candidate to retake the White House. The consensus of opinion in the Republican Party settled on George W. Bush remarkably early, at a Republican Governor's Association meeting immediately after the November 1998 election. Governor Bush had the great virtues of instant name-recognition and his father's Rolodex of fundraising contacts, with none of the bag and ideological baggage that had doomed the Gingrich revolution in 1996 and the GOP House Republican impeachment process in 1998. His landslide victory as Texas governor in November 1998 seemed to demonstrate his popular appeal, cutting into the Democratic base among groups like Hispanics and women. Virtually throughout 1999 in hypothetical match-up polls Bush enjoyed a double-digit lead over Gore. His theme of 'compassionate conservatism', while fuzzy around the edges, seemed to provide a slogan that could rally the troops. The Republicans realized that they needed a fresh approach that represented more than the single-note anti-abortionist fundamentalist Christian Right, and the anti-Clinton rhetoric of the House Republicans. Although with only six years' experience of running Texas, holding one of the weaker gubernatorial offices, Bush could

claim during the campaign that he provided a more consensual approach to governance, coupled with a few specific centrist promises including tax cuts and education reform, as well as the promise to bring a different morality to the White House. His chief rival was John McCain, an idiosyncratic and independent-minded conservative Senator from Arizona who campaigned on his war-record as a 'straight-talking' challenger from outside the Republican establishment. In addition Steve Forbes, undeterred by the results of 1996, continued his vanity campaign, along with the idiosyncratic black conservative, Alan Keyes, as well as also-rans Elisabeth Dole, Dan Quayle and Orin Hatch.

*Phase I: The Early Primaries.* The primary campaign started early, with record fund-raising. Before formally announcing in June 1999, Bush had \$15 million in the kitty and by election day his campaign and the Republican National Committee would raise a combined \$350 million. Republican pocket-books seemed to open, fuelled by anti-Clinton outrage and the tantalizing prospects of backing a single decisive winner after eight years out of the White House. In the Iowa caucus on 24 January the results showed Gore with a decisive 63 per cent of the vote to Bradley's 35 per cent, while in the Republican camp Bush took 41 per cent of the vote, with Forbes in second place with 30 per cent of the vote and the remainder divided among all others (see Figure 3). All eyes immediately turned to New Hampshire the following week on 1 February, where John McCain produced a sensational upset, gaining 49 per cent of the vote and beating Bush by 18 percentage points. In the Democratic Party, although Gore won, there was also a strong challenge since votes were almost evenly divided between Gore (52 per cent) and Bradley (48 per cent). The result of a competitive race in both parties electrified press coverage and the primary season picked up speed in the following weeks. Gore recovered his decisive lead in most states although Bradley did relatively well in liberal New England states such as Vermont (44 per cent of the vote), Connecticut (42 per cent), Rhode Island and Maine (41 per cent), Massachusetts (38 per cent) and New York (34 per cent). In Republican contests, McCain proved highly competitive by winning Michigan (50 per cent), Connecticut (49 per cent), Massachusetts (65 per cent), Rhode Island (61 per cent) and Vermont (61 per cent), as well as his home state of Arizona (60 per cent).

The primary season culminated on Super Tuesday, 7 March,

when fourteen states held primaries and caucuses, stretching coast-to-coast from California to Vermont. Only leading candidates well-resourced with campaign ads and workers could afford to make much impact on such dispersed races. The following day, Wednesday 8 March, both McCain and Bradley withdrew, outspent and out-organized. The first stage of the campaign was essentially over, although the routine primaries continued in the rest of the country during April, May and early June, with 35 contests, like a phony war after peace has been declared.

By late spring and mid-summer the news media, and the public, seemed bored by the campaign. After the initial heady excitement, both camps seemed to retreat without many clear signals about forthcoming developments. The battle for the centre ground seemed to be set, with a Tweedledee or Tweedledum choice, and America turned to more pressing matters, ranging from the Olympics to the outcome of the network series, *Survivor*. If dated from the period of formal announcement of candidacies, the 2000 campaign had not started particularly early compared with previous contests in 1984, 1988 and 1996, as some assume: Bush and Gore announced within a few days of each other in early June 1999,<sup>14</sup> although like unwanted party guests at midnight, some such as Lamar Alexander and Steve Forbes had never really stopped campaigning since the last contest. Nevertheless the withdrawal of Bradley and McCain after Super Tuesday took any real pizzazz out of the race and the campaign quickly ran out of steam. Bush returned to recamp at home in his Texas ranch and Gore divided his time between his official duties in DC and his campaign HQ in Nashville, Tennessee. The head-to-head polls from April until August fairly consistently gave Bush the edge over Gore, with the lead varying by polling company.

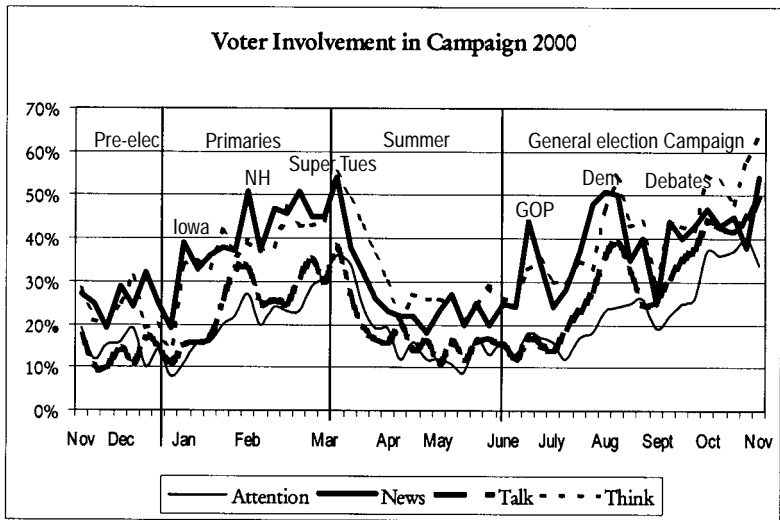
In Pew surveys monitoring news interest, about half the public (51 per cent) said that they had watched news about the presidential election 'very' or 'fairly closely' in April 2000, down from 62 per cent at roughly the same period in 1996, 65 per cent in 1992 and 68 per cent in 1988.<sup>15</sup> Broader indicators of voter interest were moni-

<sup>14</sup> For previous declarations see Harold W. Stanley and Richard G. Niemi, *Vital Statistics on American Politics 1999–2000*, Washington DC, CQ Press, 2000, Figure 1.4 pp. 63–4.

<sup>15</sup> The Pew Research Center for the People and the Press, 'Much Less Convention Interest', *Survey July 27 2000*, [www.people-press.org](http://www.people-press.org)

tored by the 'Vanishing Voter' project at Harvard University which found a gradual build-up with certain spikes of engagement from Christmas onwards through Iowa, New Hampshire and Super Tuesday, followed by a sharp fall-off in involvement after the main challengers withdrew, in mid-March. The lull in attention lasted with some minor random fluctuations throughout mid-summer (see Figure 3).

**Figure 3**  
*Public Interest in Campaign 2000*



*Notes:*

**ATTENTION.** 'During the past week, how much attention did you pay to the presidential election campaign: a great deal, quite a bit, just some, only a little, or none?'

**TALK.** 'Now we'd like you to think about the past day only. During the past day have you discussed the presidential campaign with anyone?'

**NEWS.** 'Still thinking about the past day only. Can you recall a particular news story about the presidential campaign that you read, saw, or heard during the past day?'

**THINK.** 'Now we'd like to know about the past day only. During the past day, have you been doing any thinking about the presidential campaign, or is this something that you haven't been thinking about?'

**Source:** *Vanishing Voter Project*, Joan Shorenstein Center, Kennedy School of Government, Harvard University. Field-work by ICR. Each survey is of a minimum of 1,000 adults nationwide. Questions reported above were asked of half the sample.

*Phase II: From the Conventions to the Debates.* The first signs of revival of sustained public interest came at the end of July with the GOP Convention in Philadelphia, when George Bush picked Dick Cheney of Wyoming, his father's Defense Secretary, as his running mate, a seemingly safe and steady pair of hands to bolster his administration. Although lacking charisma, Cheney added gravitas to the ticket. The GOP convention emphasized a middle-of-the-road strategy, including a more diverse big tent for the party. Bush's convention speech lacked poetry and vision, but the party unity in Philadelphia made it appear far more successful than in 1996, producing a 5-point bounce for Bush in the polls. But it was Al Gore's choice of Joe Lieberman on 7 August, and the following Democratic convention in Los Angeles, that captured the headlines and generated greater public attention. Gore, trailing in the polls, needed to add excitement and zip to the Democratic ticket. The choice of Joe Lieberman as his running mate, an orthodox Jew, and moreover one of the Senators who had proved most critical of Clinton's affair, contributed a much-needed spark to the campaign. This boost led straight into the Los Angeles convention where Gore articulated his populist message, repeatedly using the phrase 'working families', and promising to go after unpopular special interests like drug and insurance companies, as well as delivering on a laundry-list of specific policy issues such as Medicare, social security and education. Perhaps the most important theme, however, in seeking to protect himself from Clinton fatigue, was encapsulated in Gore's phrase: 'I stand here tonight as my own man.' Rather than claiming credit for the past eight years of economic boom, Gore decided to run on his future performance. Combined with 'the kiss', over-hyped in the media, the convention produced a critical 10-point popular boost, catapulting Gore into a modest lead and leading towards the last phase of the campaign. Nielsen estimate that on both cable and network news about 14 million homes watched coverage of the Republican convention, while about 15.4 million homes tuned into the Democratic convention, in both cases slightly down (by 2 to 5 per cent respectively) on 1996.<sup>16</sup>

*Phase III: From the Debates to Polling Day.* The conventional wisdom held that the candidate ahead on Labor Day (4 September) would be in the White House by spring, and a series of post-

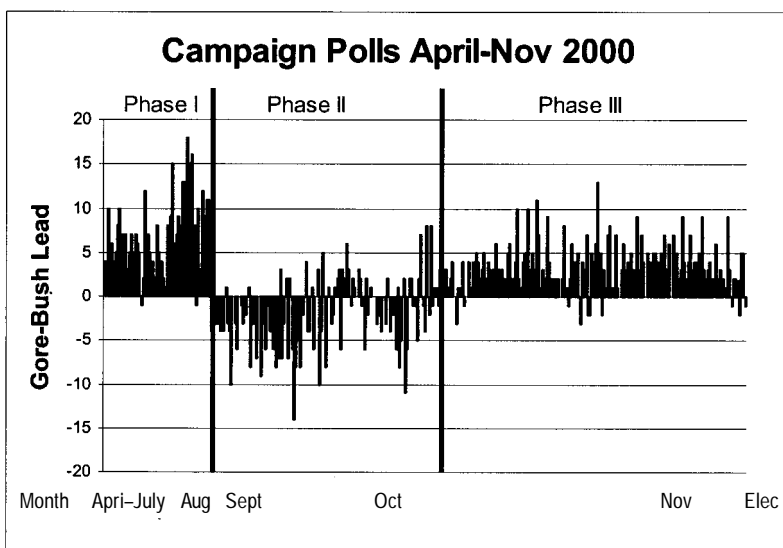
<sup>16</sup> Nielsen Media Research. [www.Nielsenmedia.com](http://www.Nielsenmedia.com)

convention minor campaign gaffes by the GOP seemed to reinforce this perception. Much of the news coverage seemed to follow the fortunes of the candidates in the polls, turning against Bush during September and highlighting problems in his campaign, such as his tendency to misspeak. The critical events promised to be the presidential debates, scheduled for Boston on 3 October, St Louis, Missouri on 11 October, and Winston-Salem, North Carolina on 17 October, along with the vice-presidential debate in Danville, Kentucky on 5 October. Expectations were high that Gore could easily consolidate his lead, given his experience and debate record, while Bush would struggle to hold his own. In the end, the first debate proved problematic for Gore, who appeared to many to be the school bully, all-knowing and too aggressive, an expert on policy, while Bush, by doing better than expected, appeared the more likeable regular guy. Gore toned down the heavy theatrical sighs and Alpha Male in the second debate, focused on foreign policy and the crisis in the Middle East. Bush, on the other hand, again by managing a minimal level of well-briefed competence in this sphere, did better than expected. Like Goldilocks and the Three Bears, it was only in the third debate in the town-hall format that Gore appeared to strike a comfortable balance, not too aggressive yet not too passive. But according to the Nielsen estimates, the audience, that had been about 46 million watching the first debate in Boston, shrank to about 38 million by Winston-Salem.<sup>17</sup> The size of TV audience for the debates was similar to levels of interest in 1996, although dramatically down from 1988 and 1992.

The opinion polls showed that Gore's post-convention lead had reversed by early October, with a series of surveys reporting a tight race during the last month; some suggested that the outcome remained too close to call within the margin of error, while others suggested that Bush was enjoying a modest lead in the run-up to polling day on 7 November. As Figure 4 shows, the majority of national opinion polls published during the campaign reported a close race, usually with a slight edge for Bush apart from the post-convention Gore bump during Phase II. Some indicators proved more erratic, however, notably the CNN/*USA Today* Gallup tracking

<sup>17</sup> The audience on all TV channels was estimated to be over 60 million for each debate in 1992 and 1996, and declined to between 35–45 million in 1996 and 2000. For details see [www.nielsenmedia.com](http://www.nielsenmedia.com).

**Figure 4**  
*Campaign Polls April–November 2000*



*Note:* The lead in the popular vote for Bush over Gore in all national campaign polls (N. 327) published during the campaign from April to Election Day.

*Source:* Data compiled from [www.pollingreport.com](http://www.pollingreport.com)

survey that became known among the press as the Nasdaq poll, because of its daily fluctuations. In many areas of the country the margin appeared to shrink in the final stages, as more and more states became competitive, so that national opinion polls became an even less reliable guide to the outcome across the whole country.

The news media's coverage of the official campaign showed many of the characteristics that have been developing over the years, in particular a diversification of the news outlets as fewer people tuned into the evening network news; and in contrast more people got their election news from cable channels like MSNBC and CNN and from the multiple channels available on the Internet. Content analysis of the network evening news for ABC, CBS and NBC from Labor Day until 7 November, was conducted by the Center for Media and Public Affairs on behalf of the Brookings Institute. The study showed that overall the amount of time devoted to coverage of the election on the evening news on the three major networks during

the official campaign was marginally up on 1996, but dramatically down from 1992. Much of the media coverage throughout the general election campaign was fuelled by the closeness of the race, as reported in the opinion polls. The study reported that almost three-quarters (71 per cent) of all election stories focused on the 'horse' race in campaign 2000, discussing who's ahead, who's behind, and election strategies.<sup>18</sup> In contrast the equivalent figures were 48 per cent of all election stories in 1996 and 55 per cent in 1992. The pattern was fairly uniform across all the major networks, although the *Newshour with Jim Lehrer* on PBS proved the honourable exception, providing an issue-based alternative for those interested in hearing more details about George Bush's tax-cut proposals or social security lockboxes by Al Gore, with only one third of PBS's coverage devoted to the race. The network's emphasis on the race was evident throughout the general election campaign although this coverage surged during the closing stage, becoming the subject of eight out of ten stories in the week before polling day. Overall the tone of the network news coverage of the election proved equally balanced between the major candidates, since about 60–63 per cent of coverage of Bush and Gore proved negative, and the level of negativity proved slightly less than in 1992 and 1996.

Afterwards, a Pew survey monitoring the public's reaction found that campaign 2000 received better grades than most recent presidential contests.<sup>19</sup> Compared with similar surveys conducted since 1988, Pew found that more people (68 per cent) in this contest expressed satisfaction with the choice of candidates, more people (83 per cent) said that they thought they had learnt enough to make an informed choice, and most people (46 per cent) thought that there had been less mud-slinging than in previous contests. The choice may not have been particularly exciting, but the debates were substantive, detailed and issue-oriented. Neither candidate proved a fool or a knave, and if people seemed to have difficulty deciding between them, this could be because peace and prosperity generated few pressing issues crying out for attention and presidential leadership. For malcontents unhappy with the major parties, there

<sup>18</sup> For details see the Hess Report, Brookings Institution and the Center for Media and Public Affairs. <http://www.brookings.edu/GS/Projects/HessReport>

<sup>19</sup> 'Campaign 2000 highly rated' based on a poll conducted 10–12 November 2000 by the Pew Research Center for the People and the Press. See [www.people-press.org](http://www.people-press.org)



were also alternatives in the Green Party of Ralph Nader within the liberal-left, and the Reform Party of Buchanan on the right, although each was deeply divided internally. Towards the end of the campaign, in particular, Nader attracted increased media attention and support at popular rallies as he struggled to make the 5 per cent of the vote necessary to qualify for federal funds for campaign 2004.

#### THE OUTCOME AND RESULTS: FLORIDA AND BEYOND

The importance of this election will be remembered less for the dull but worthy campaign than for the remarkable series of events that were sparked on election day and continued in the welter of legal challenges, court cases and partisan attacks in the days and weeks that followed as planes full of wing-tip attorneys, partisan operatives and media camp-followers descended upon Florida airports. On election night, as polls closed on the east coast, the outcome caused a roller-coaster of emotions with everyone reaching for the Pepto-Bismol, the professional pollsters, the network anchors, and the partisan public. At 7 p.m. the polls closed in most of Florida and between 7.49 and 8.10 p.m. EST Florida was called for Gore by all the major networks (led by NBC) and the Associated Press, based on the VNS exit poll. At the time, with other major battleground states like New York, Michigan and Illinois falling into the Democratic camp, it appeared to commentators and observers that Al Gore was heading for a comfortable victory. Shortly after the networks awarded Florida to Gore, Bush strategist Karl Rove went on air to dispute the numbers. The doors of the Texas Governor's mansion were opened to the TV cameras and George W. Bush broadcast a brief interview, saying that it was too early for the networks to call Florida. Then VNS warned the networks about problems with their results, in particular that their models had given too much weight to Democratic votes in some districts in South Florida. The pollsters had based their selection of 45 Florida precincts on past voting behaviour, not taking into account more recent demographic shifts. There was a problem with their over-Democratic sample in the Tampa area and also data processing errors in Jacksonville.<sup>20</sup> At 9.55 p.m. EST CNN placed Florida back

<sup>20</sup> For more details see Pippa Norris, 'Too Close to Call: Opinion Polls in Campaign 2000', *The Harvard International Journal of Press-Politics*, 6:1 (2000).

into the undecided category and all the other networks followed by 10.20 p.m. Bush also started to pick up many of the smaller states in the Midwest and mountain-west belt that have long been traditional Republican territory, making headway in the Electoral College vote.

After midnight VNS delivered another update to the networks, indicating that with 98 to 99 per cent of the precincts counted, Bush led in Florida by some 29,000 votes. Based on analysis of this data, at 2.16 a.m. John Ellis, Bush's first cousin, who headed Fox News's election desk, called the state and thus the presidency for George Bush and all the networks followed shortly afterwards. VNS had not made the call directly, although their data were used in the calculations made by Fox. Newspapers prepared their infamous 'Bush wins' headlines and the projection followed across news websites. On ABC, Peter Jennings did voice some health warnings, asking Sam Donaldson and George Stephanopoulos to comment if they had any reason to doubt the projected result but, isolated in the studio, neither did. As is well known, a few moments later, at 2.30 a.m., based on the network projection, Al Gore made his first phone call to George Bush, conceding the race. At 3 a.m. Gore and his entourage left his hotel in the motorcade driving towards the planned concession speech at Nashville's War Memorial. At 3.15 a.m., en route, Bill Daley, Gore's campaign manager, learned by mobile phone that Bush's lead in Florida had shrunk to 600 votes. At 3.42 a.m., Gore made the second phone call to Bush, withdrawing his earlier concession. By 4 a.m., as Bill Daley announced that Gore's campaign continued before cheering supporters in Nashville, and the Florida recount was automatically triggered by the margin of the vote, CNN network anchors reversed themselves for a second time, putting Florida back into the 'too close to call' category. The following morning New Mexico followed suit.

The outcome of the network projections produced a surge of emotions in the heightened partisan atmosphere of election night and the next morning as first the Gore camp, and then the Bush camp, thought that victory was within their grasp. Many who retired to bed in the early hours of the morning, believing that Bush was president-elect, awoke the next morning surprised to find that the result remained far from clear. Like an endless Groundhog Day, for days and days America awoke finding that it remained an endless Campaign 2000 election special. The following day, and the next,

viewership figures for cable news first doubled then tripled over the usual levels as Americans tuned in fascinated to learn who their next president might be, news websites experienced record hits, and there was talk of little else over the nation's water-coolers. At this stage, with hindsight, we can only speculate about some of the consequences of the media's coverage of this process, but it is possible that if Florida had remained all night in the too-close-to-call category then perhaps some of the bitterness and heat of the immediate aftermath of pregnant chads<sup>21</sup> and butterfly ballots could have been avoided.

The election was turned over to the lawyers and the multiple complex lawsuits. The automatic recount in Florida became the eye of the storm. The first hint of the procedural challenges to come arose on 8 November from the butterfly ballots used in Palm Beach County, confusing an estimated 19,000 voters, often elderly New York Jewish snowbirds, to cast an accidental ballot for Buchanan or to disqualify their vote by double punching the card.<sup>22</sup> On 9 November the Gore team requested a hand count in four counties, and a preliminary injunction was passed to prevent certification of the final recount. The unofficial AP tally of the Florida vote, as votes were painfully recounted, suggested that Bush's lead over Gore was well within the margin of error, at 327 votes. On 13 November, Florida's Secretary of State, Kathleen Harris, co-chair of the Bush campaign in the state, refused to extend the 5 p.m. EST deadline the following day for vote certification, but she was prevented from doing so by a ruling of the Florida Supreme Court. On 18 November, after absentee ballots were recounted, uncertified results suggested that Bush's lead had grown to 930 votes. Hand counts proceeded in Broward county and Palm Beach county, but on 22 November, in a fateful step, after a noisy GOP demonstration inside the building, Miami Dade county called off its recount. On 26 November Katherine Harris announced the certified totals for Florida, giving Bush a 537-vote lead over Gore, and thereby awarding him the state and the presidency. The following day, however, far from settling

<sup>21</sup> 'Pregnant chads' are the ballot papers that have been slightly indented by voting styluses, rather than wholly pushed through.

<sup>22</sup> 'Butterfly ballots' refers to the designs used in Miami Dade county, with the names of candidates listed on both sides of the ballot paper, where many ex-New York Jewish retirees (i.e. snowbirds) were confused into voting for Buchanan rather than Gore.

**Table 1**  
*Presidential Election Results, 1980–2000*

Popular Vote	Dem	Dem %	Rep	Rep %	Other %	Maj %
1980	Carter	41	Reagan	50.7	8.3	9.7
1984	Mondale	40.6	Reagan	58.8	0.6	18.2
1988	Dukakis	45.6	Bush	53.4	1.0	7.8
1992	Clinton	43.0	Bush	37.4	19.6	5.6
1996	Clinton	49.2	Dole	40.7	10.1	8.5
2000	Gore	48.6	Bush	48.2	4.0	0.4

Electoral College Vote	Dem N.	Dem %	Rep N.	Rep %	Winner	Maj
1980	49	9	489	91	Reagan	440
1984	13	2	525	98	Reagan	512
1988	111	21	426	79	Bush	315
1992	370	69	168	31	Clinton	202
1996	379	70	159	30	Clinton	220
2000	267	50	271	50	Bush	4

Source: Harold W. Stanley and Richard G. Niemi, 'Trends 1980–1996', from *Vital Statistics on American Politics 1999–2000*, Washington DC, CQ Press, 2000.

**Table 2**  
*House of Representatives, 1992–2000*

	Dem	Rep	Ind	Maj
1992	258	176	1	82 Dem
1994	203	231	1	28 GOP
1996	207	227	1	20 GOP
1998	211	223	1	12 GOP
2000	212	221	2	9 GOP

*US Senate*

	Dem	Rep	Ind	Maj
1992	57	43	0	14 Dem
1994	48	52	0	4 GOP
1996	45	55	0	10 GOP
1998	45	55	0	10 GOP
2000	50	50	0	0

Source: Harold W. Stanley and Richard G. Niemi, 'Trends 1992–1998', from *Vital Statistics on American Politics 1999–2000*, Washington DC, CQ Press, 2000.

the case, the Gore team decided to contest the certified result with a plethora of lawsuits. With the Supreme Court intervening in the case on 1 December, and continued court battles on both sides, the uncertainty continued until 13 December, when Gore officially withdrew from the race on the day following the Supreme Court coup de grâce, the latter decision settled by a vote that split 5:4, reflecting almost perfectly the partisan divisions in the American electorate. On 18 December the Electoral College met, leading to an official tally on 6 January and Inauguration Day of 20 January.

Across the whole country, out of over 100 million votes cast, the result gave Gore a lead of 357,852 in the popular vote, or 0.4 per cent (see Table 1), the closest result since Kennedy–Nixon in 1960. Yet in the electoral college Bush beat Gore by 271 to 267 votes, the closest result since 1876 when Hayes beat Tilden by a margin of one electoral vote. The result was close across Congress as well, allowing the GOP to hold on to a lead of 9, reducing yet further the majority they acquired in 1994, while the Senate currently remains split down the middle 50:50 (see Table 2). Although a weakened Bush presidency can therefore hope for cooperation from a GOP-held Congress, without a clear legislative majority it seems unlikely that any controversial measures can pass.

The breakdown of the vote in Table 3, revealed by the VNS exit poll, shows some of the reasons for the closeness of the race. The demographics of Democratic support remain much as in 1996, with Gore's support largely a mirror image of Clinton's, in terms of the familiar gaps by gender, race, region, income and region. Gore obviously did best among women, in shoring-up the vote among African Americans although doing slightly less well among Hispanics, in the East, and among poorer Americans. There were also stark differences in this election between 'traditionalists': middle-aged married voters with children living in the rural South and Midwest who came from a religious background, and the 'modernists' including single college-educated professionals living in urban cities on both coasts, who rarely attend church. The geographic base, shown in Figure 5 with Gore's share of the popular vote, illustrates the split between the Democratic vote at the coastal periphery and the Republican heart of the country. While the Democrats carried major states like California, New York and Michigan, the Republicans held their base throughout much of the

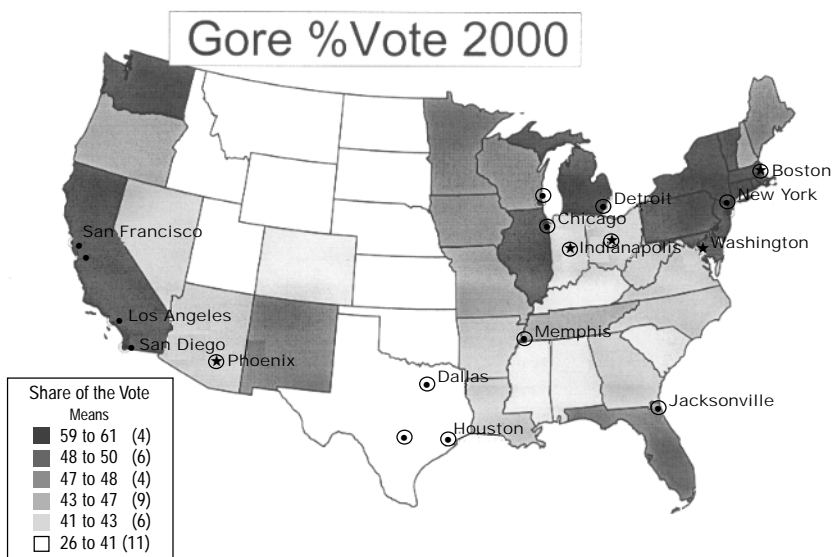
**Table 3**  
*Demographics of the Result*

	1992 Clinton	1996 Clinton	2000 Gore	1996–2000 Change
<b>ALL</b>	43	49	48	-1
<b>GENDER</b>				
Men	41	43	42	-1
Women	45	54	54	0
<b>RACE</b>				
White	39	43	42	-1
Black	83	84	90	6
Hispanic	61	72	67	-5
Asian	31	43	54	11
<b>REGION</b>				
East	47	55	56	+1
Midwest	42	48	48	0
South	41	46	43	-3
West	43	48	48	0
<b>INCOME</b>				
Under \$15,000	58	59	57	-2
\$15-30K	45	53	54	+1
\$30-50K	41	48	49	+1
\$50+	39	44	45	+1
<b>PARTY ID</b>				
Republican	10	13	8	-5
Independent	38	43	45	2
Democrats	77	84	86	2
<b>IDEOLOGY</b>				
Liberals	68	78	80	2
Moderates	47	57	52	-5
Conservatives	18	20	17	-3
<b>PREVIOUS VOTE</b>				
Democratic	83	85	82	-3
Other		22	27	5
Republican	21	13	7	-6

*Source: VNS Exit Polls in 'Who Voted', New York Times, 12 November 2000.*

South (even Tennessee) and the Midwest. While Nader's 3 per cent of the vote nationwide was insufficient to break the 5 per cent barrier to qualify the Green Party for federal funding in 2004, his 2 per

**Figure 5**  
*The Geography of the Democratic Vote, 2000*



cent support in Florida was sufficient to deprive Gore of the presidency.

Where there was greater change from the Clinton base, however, was by partisan and ideological identities. Clinton had aimed strategically for a more moderate third-way centre ground, thereby making some gains among moderate Republicans. By focusing his populist appeal on more traditional liberal grounds, arguing in the convention that the party needed to campaign for working families, Gore consolidated his base (against the Nader challenge) but thereby lost some moderate Republican support. The election produced slightly greater partisan polarization, even before the Florida outcome. Not surprisingly, according to the exit poll, when asked about the relative importance of issues or personal qualities in making up their minds, 55 per cent of those who supported Gore said that issues were more important, while 62 per cent of those who backed Bush cited personal qualities. Gore also came out strongly among his supporters in terms of understanding the issues, caring about people, and having experience, while Bush was seen by his supporters as more honest and trustworthy, likeable and a strong leader.

But in the end the usual demographic and geographic analysis of the vote remains of less interest than the dramatic events of butterfly ballots and pregnant chads, of Supreme Court challenges and contested recounts, of unexpected ups and downs in a topsy-turvy election night and the following days. George W. will enter the White House in January, after all, but with a presidency battered and bruised from all the turmoil and shouting, all the partisan rancour and bile. And all of this promises to produce congressional stalemate, public doubts about the legitimacy and simple accuracy of the electoral process, and elections determined by lawyers rather than ballots. Whether the Democrats can exact their revenge in 2002 and then 2004, in an election process that never ends, remains to be seen.