

FOREIGN POLICY ISSUES IN THE AMERICAN PRESIDENTIAL DEBATES¹

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Debat Calon presiden Amerika Serikat telah berlangsung sebelum Presiden Bush meraih kemenangan pemilihan umum di bulan November yang lalu. Perdebatan ini lebih dari sekedar sebuah peristiwa politik biasa karena sekaligus juga merupakan teks yang memaparkan perdebatan panjang makna dan nilai keyakinan liberal bangsa Amerika. Hasil pemilihan menunjukkan betapa tajamnya *instinct* politik George W. Bush dan Karl Rove. Mereka berhasil membaca gelagat kultural Amerika Serikat demi menyusun sebuah dukungan politik mayoritas bagi kepemimpinan George W. Bush di tahun 2004-2008

Elections are seen as harmless athletic contests, in which it's fun to root for a winning team; by others, as mass deceptions, which pacify citizens by making them think they control government; and by still others as solemn events in which popular sovereignty is exercised and rulers are held accountable to the ruled.

Benjamin I. Page, 1978

Introduction

Much has been written about the workings of electoral democracy, how voters decide and the effect of a persuasive message conveyed by American media. Despite the remarkable contribution of studies of American elections few have fully captured the gradually changing world and its effect on American thinking. September 11th, 2001 terrorist attacks had an even bigger impact on prevailing mood in the United States. The upshot was a seemingly resurgent America with a powerful motive for global activism. The content of the September 30th, 2004 debate reflected closely this new American preoccupation. My purpose is to explain the significance of this defining moment in America's long debates with itself over new types of engagement as an evolving notion of American identity. The media provided a more direct link between the public and the candidate and allowed communicative acts that negotiate meanings and values pertaining to the American liberal creed.

What's immediately clear from the debate is that what is at stake is the notion of liberal centrism in the United States. In order to understand what I have just asserted we need to take a look at both public opinion polls and how preferences and impressions are reinforced and changed. We must look at evidence of the

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occurrence of affective bonding where the issues may have strengthened predispositions or are the voters' preferences and impressions are especially resistant to change.³

The American Social Fabric and Public Opinion

America will be noticeably younger and ethnically varied by 2050, America's median age will be 36 compared to Europe 53 and China 44. Economic growth will average 1.3 percentage points and 60% of the world's economic growth since 1995 has come from America.⁴ This relative economic gain may be revised but if the pattern continues America may be entering a period of even greater dominance. The public is usually generous in its support of presidents in the pursuit of foreign policy. September 11th was an awakening, a moment of reckoning of the extent of American power.⁵ America has gained a new determination and sense of purpose as it experienced a dramatic manifestation of terrorism in the United States. This clear sense of purpose often gives us a sense that ultimately the United States alone can set and enforce the rules that govern international relations. It is in America's long-term national interest to help more countries to take part in the process of integration with the process of international trade, investment and technology transfer.⁶ President Bush seems to have concluded that containment has reached its limits and opinion polls reveals the popularity of American activism abroad.⁷

How September 11th has made Americans to become more attentive to development outside the United States and more willing to take action to reduce their sense of vulnerability is evident in figures 1-2 and 1-3.⁸

Ninety-one percent of the public judged terrorism to be a "critical threat" followed closely by a concern about chemical and biological weapons 86 percent and 85 percent respectively. See figure 2-1.⁹

In figure 2.2 just behind goals related to terrorism and weapons of mass destruction come non military goals such as protecting American jobs at 85 percent and stopping the flow of illegal drugs at 81 percent.¹⁰

Most Americans supported a multilateral U.S. foreign policy. A large majority of Americans supported a stronger United Nations see figure 4-3.¹¹

³ David O. Sears and Steven H. Chaffee, "Uses and Effects of the 1976 Debates: AN Overview of Empirical Studies," in S. Kraus (ed.), *The Great Debates: Carter vs Ford*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1979.

⁴ *The Economist*, November 2003.

⁵ Michael Ignatieff, "The Burden. With a military of unrivaled might, the United States rules a new kind of empire. Will this cost America its soul or save it? *The New York Times Magazine*, 5 January 2003: 22-54.

⁶ "Present at the Creation," *The Economist*, 29th June 2002: 3-28.

⁷ *Ibid*: 25.

⁸ The Chicago Council on Foreign Relations, *Worldviews 2002, American Public Opinion and Foreign Policy, 2002*: 13.

⁹ *Ibid*: 15

¹⁰ *Ibid*: 19

¹¹ *Ibid*: 32

BIGGEST PROBLEMS FACING THE COUNTRY 1974-2002
 The most cited problem facing the country in Council surveys since 1974 and the percentage of respondents citing the problem.

2002	Terrorism	36
1998	Crime	26
1994	Crime	42
1990	Budged deficit	30
1986	Drug abuse	27
1982	Unemployment	68
1978	Inflation	67
1974	Inflation	56

Figure 1-2

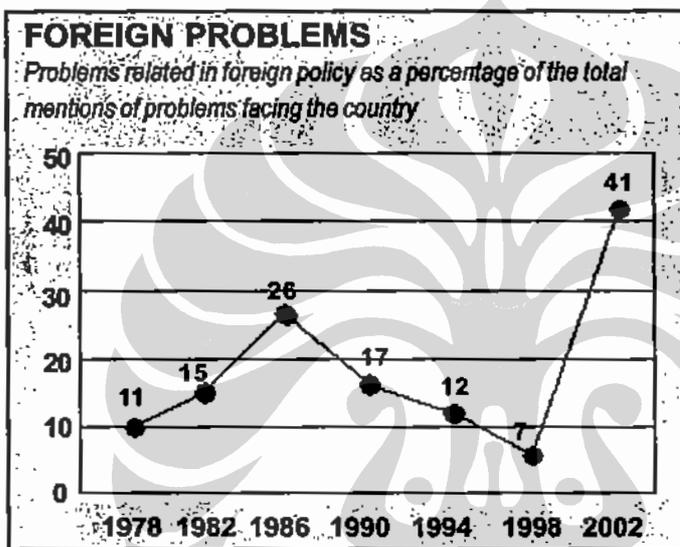


Figure 3-1

CRITICAL THREATS

Percentage who view each of the following as a "critical threat" to U.S. vital interests.

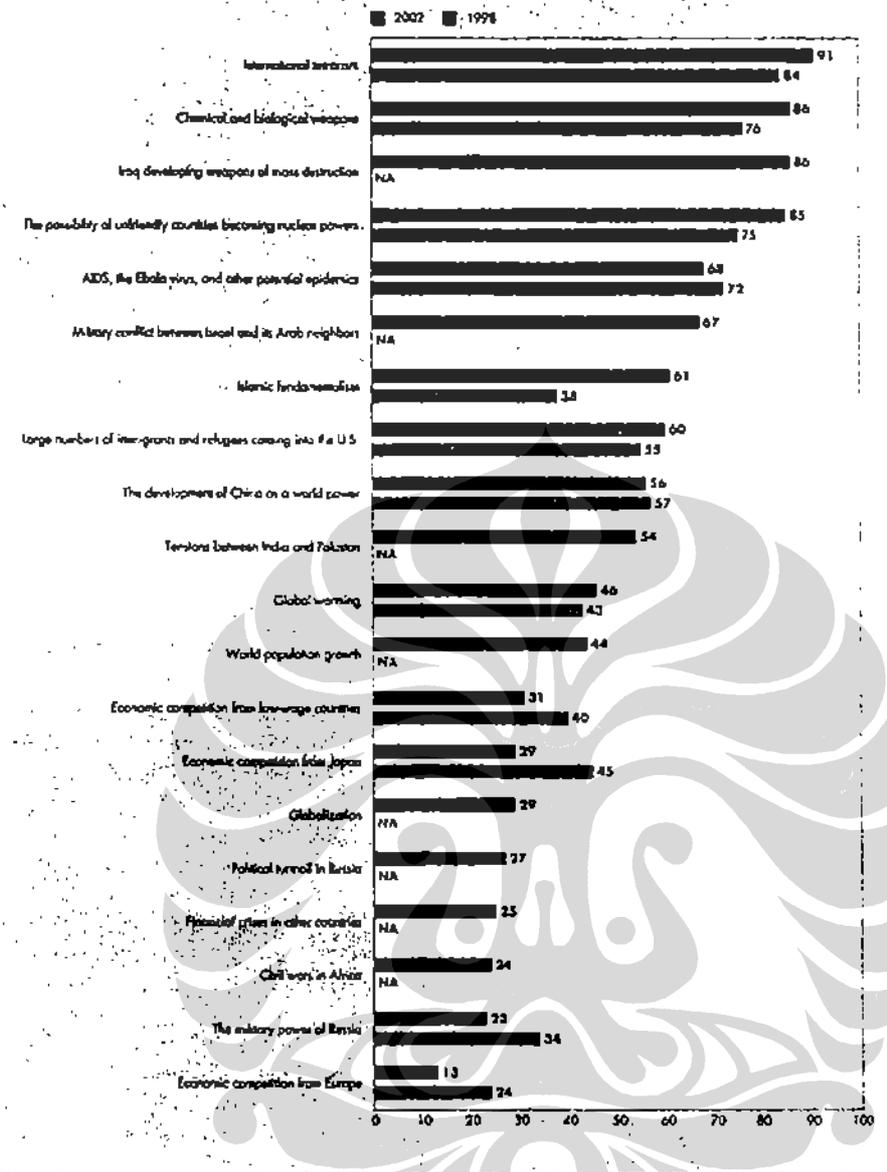


Figure 2-1

FOREIGN POLICY GOALS

Percentage who say each of the following should be a "very important" goal of U.S. foreign policy

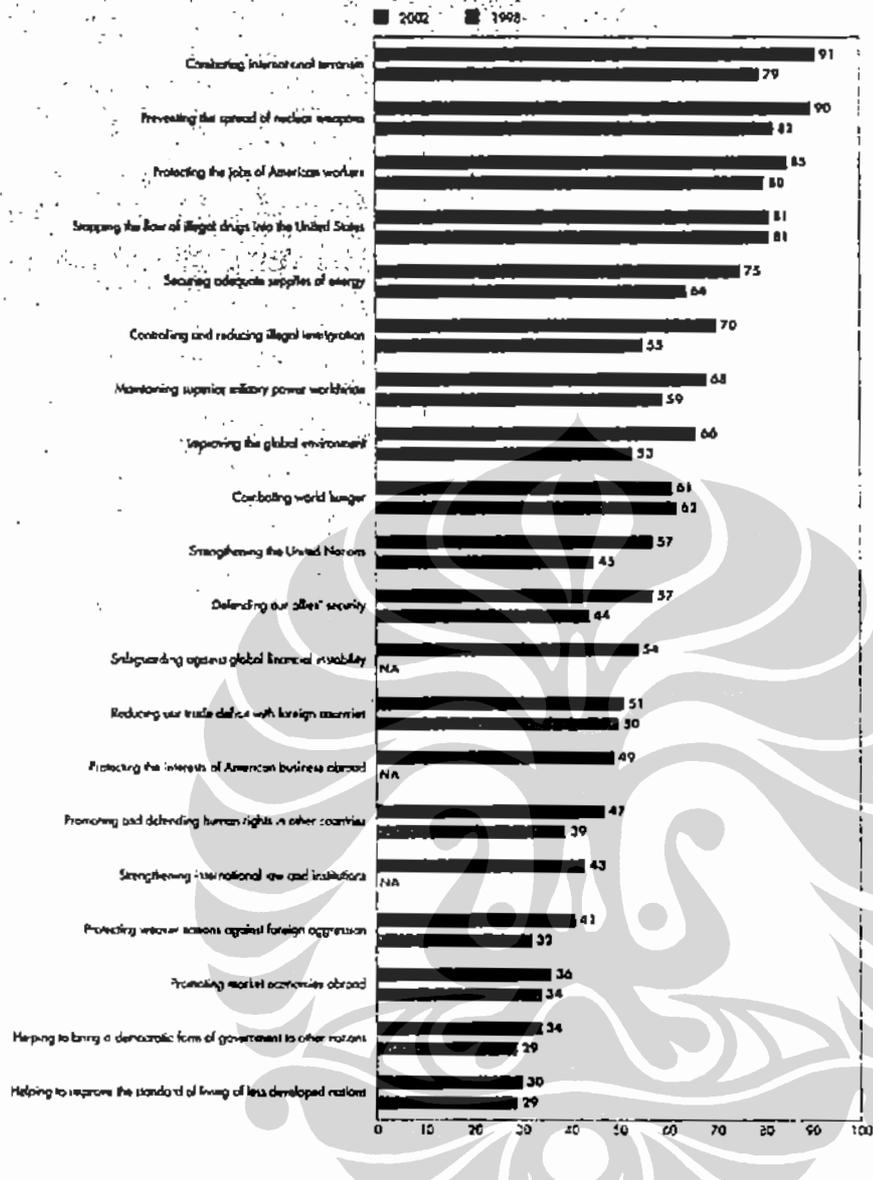


Figure 2-2

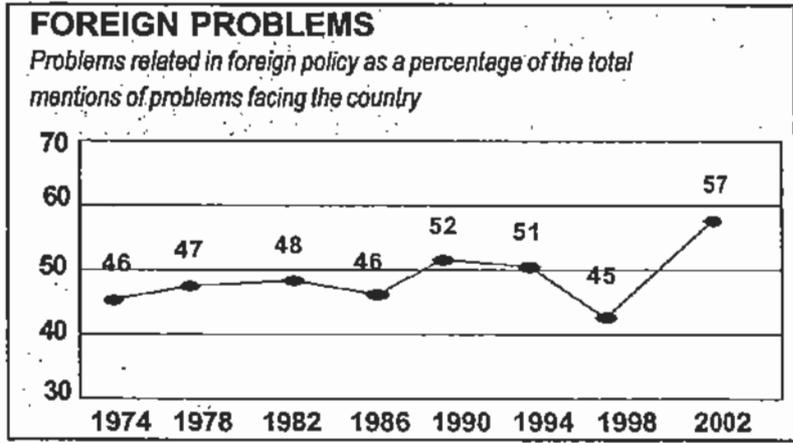


Figure 4-3

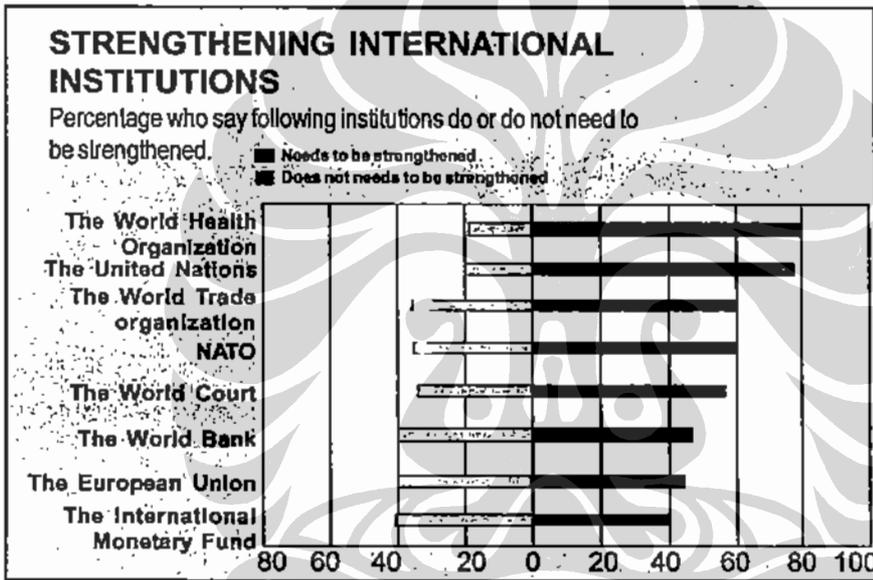


Figure 4-4

September 11th has also altered how Americans view key countries around the globe, see figure 6-1.¹²

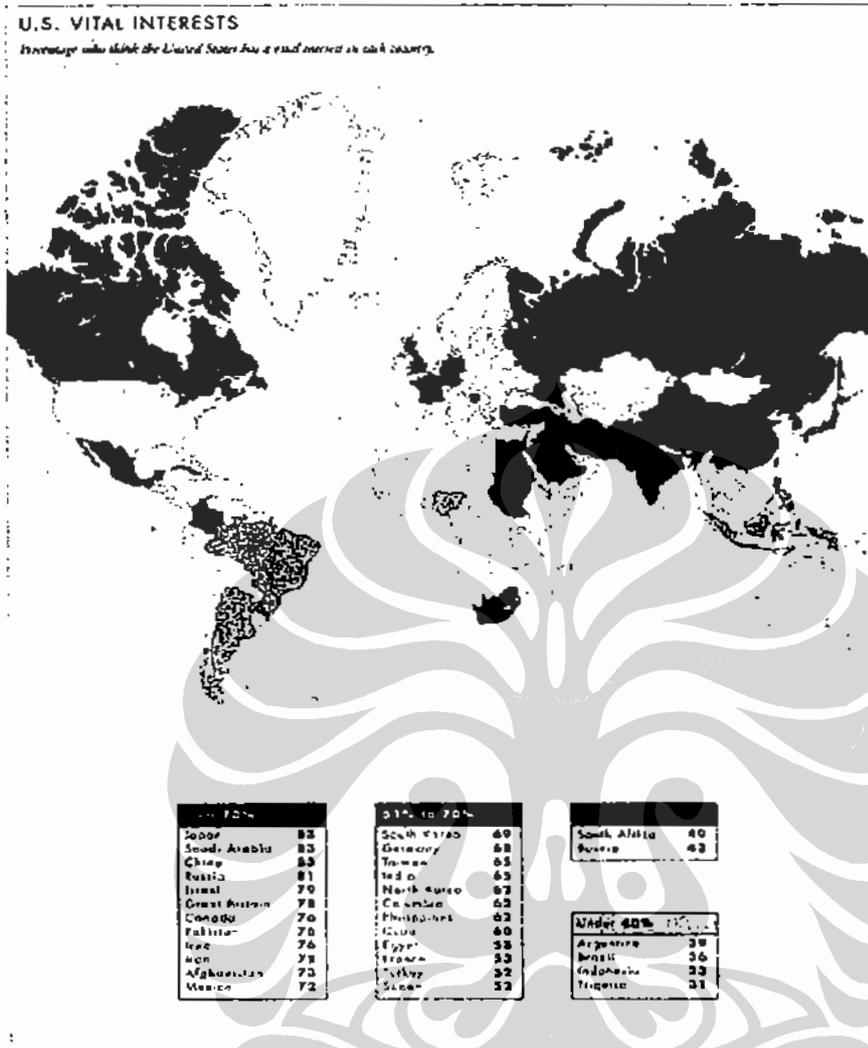


Figure 6-1

¹² Ibid: 47

The Candidates and the Campaign Issues

The important question to ask further is how do the candidates relate the campaign's foreign policy issues to the changes currently occurring in American political terrain. President Bush has exaggerated existing division, increased the importance of extreme opinion and lessened the moderating influence of the middle. This contrasted with the *Philadelphia System* that was well suited for a liberal centrist philosophy of government eschewing the extremes of left and right.

The idea of an expansive, inclusive United States of America has always been the straightest path to the country's heart but now, America comprises of two cultures, one is religious, puritanical, family-centered and somewhat conformist. The other is tolerant and multicultural and occupies different worlds.¹³ Traditionalists concentrated in the "red states" that frame the spine of the Rockies and cutting through the South. The rest of the country is more secular that includes the Pacific coast, northeastern and upper mid-western states, these are the "blue states."¹⁴ Barry Lynn, executive director of Americans United for the Separation of Church and State believes that this election cycle is the most religiously infused.¹⁵

The Presidential Debates

How then do foreign policy issues debated by President Bush and Senator Kerry relate to the process of the changing of the meaning and practices of American identity? Because identity has a constitutive and not a causal standing and that particular identity claims can be inscribed with different meanings at different historical moments¹⁶ American politics that has become more partisan had the chance to be reminded again through the presidential debates that people become Americans by adopting a creed enshrined in the United States' constitution and declaration of independence.

Senator Kerry represented this connection to American liberal centrism. On foreign policy he emphasizes multilateralism and believes that America should exhaust the remedies of the United Nations and not take America to war without the plan to win the peace. Senator Kerry prioritizes nuclear proliferation initiative and accused President Bush of having sent mixed messages on bunker busting weapons. Senator Kerry asserted that he would secure loose nuclear materials in four-year time and accused President Bush that at the current pace it would need thirteen years to succeed. Senator Kerry puts forth an appeal to the needs of American domestic issues like healthcare, school construction, prescription drugs for seniors, building fire houses, instituting cop programs, fixing tunnel and bridges, protecting chemical and nuclear plants, inspecting containers and cargo holds of airplanes.

¹³ John F. Dickerson and Karen Tumulty, "The Love Him Hate Him President," in *Time*, 1 December 2003: 16-25; Nancy Gibbs, "The Faith Factor," in *Time*, 21 June 2004: 26-31

¹⁴ *The Economist*, November 2003.

¹⁵ Nancy Gibbs, "The Faith Factor," p.21.

¹⁶ Shibley Telhami and Michael Barnett, "Introduction: Identity and Foreign Policy in the Middle East," in Shibley Telhami and Michael Barnett (eds.), *Identity and Foreign Policy in the Middle East*, Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2002: 18.

President Bush focused on a multi-prong strategy of freedom around the world. He emphasized his duty to protect America, to achieve the peace through strength and use American assets to constantly stay on the offensive and at the same time spread liberty. President Bush used a multi-national talks to deal with North Korea and Iran Weapons of Mass Destruction issue, and will use the African Union to resolve the crisis in Darfur. President Bush has also started the Proliferation Security Initiative and continues with Missile Defense Plans. President Bush regarded Senator Kerry's assertion that America needed to earn the world's respect by passing the global test, as totally irrelevant because what is at stake is the protection of the American people. His administration has made efforts to safeguard the country by funding the Department of Homeland Security and increase border support and reform intelligence services.

President Bush highlighted Senator Kerry's character issue as he had sent mixed messages that the war is a great diversion from the war on terrorism, Senator Kerry therefore doesn't have the judgment to be president. That Senator Kerry's pledge to change the dynamics on the ground didn't play well with his criticism of the leader of Iraq Iyad Allawi. Conversely, Senator Kerry has accused President Bush of not being candid to the American people and had let American troops down by not giving the proper equipment and protection.

Bush sees his constancy as a way to impress cynical voters and to keep his team motivated.¹⁷ Likewise a foreign policy resolution is deemed as a weapon: enemies will yield only if they conclude that he will not.¹⁸ In the long run Bush believes that the only way to secure the United States is to spread freedom. The Bush Doctrine is aimed at securing the peace, protecting the peace, and extending the peace with the spread of democracy. Bush truly believes in the power of freedom and the evil of Islamic radicalism.¹⁹ Senator Kerry seems unwilling to confront Bush to defend a war that seems quite indefensible, his advisors instead wants him to campaign on domestic issues.²⁰ As a campaigner Kerry has a habit of looking into the abyss before finding ways to turn things around.²¹

Conclusions:

The initial sounding from the first presidential debate brought Senator Kerry some good news because he came back to win a second look. He won the debate on the appearance of strength, but Senator Kerry's handicap is being less about policy than personality. Because women gave Senator Kerry stronger ratings than men did, the goal for him was to lock women in and turn them out on November 2nd. During the debate Bush's unwillingness to admit error seemed debilitating than Senator Kerry's liberalism, however an obvious flaw in Senator Kerry's campaign strategy was that he merely campaigned on a return to liberal centrism

¹⁷ Nancy Gibbs and John F. Dickerson, "Inside the Mind of George W. Bush. For this President, the Essence of Wisdom Lies in Knowing When Not to Change," in *Time*, 6 September 2004: 18-37.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*: 20.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*: 29.

²⁰ Joe Klein, "All You Have To Do Is Believe," in *Time*, 20 September 2004: 51.

²¹ Michael Duffy and Karen Tumulty, "Coolness Under Fire. Kerry insists he will prevail, but will a surper message be enough? Here's how the race is changing," in *Time*, 20 September 2004: 48.

whereas George W. Bush managed to radically recast the Republican Party. The GOP has now become a party of a Big Government that is religiously motivated and will function as a tool for transforming the world.²² Consequently, while Bush talks about the transformational power of liberty, Kerry strikes a traditionalist tone by wanting to go back to America's old alliances and increase American troop levels worldwide by 40,000.²³ American election results indicated that Senator Kerry's attempt at affective bonding with his liberal constituency did not effectively sway the voters' preferences and impressions that are especially resistant to change. The question Americans face in this election is whether in a world in crisis, would there be a greater risk in Bush's radicalism or Kerry's gradualism?

The change in the polls shows how tight the race was. Prior to the presidential debates Time/CNN Poll in February 16, 2004, June 21, 2004, and September 20th differed from the October 19-20 Poll.

In answer to the question: suppose the 2004 election for president were being held today and you had to choose between Massachusetts Senator John Kerry, the Democrat, and George W. Bush, the Republican, for whom would you vote?

Month	George W. Bush	John F. Kerry
October 19-20, 2004	51%	46%
September 20, 2004	52%	41%
June 21, 2004	49%	48%
February 16, 2004	50%	48%

And President George Bush's approval rating on July 19, 2004 was 48% and on September 6th, 2004 dropped to 46%. Senator Kerry's experienced a drop in the percentage of people who say they have a favorable opinion of him to 44% from 53% the month before.

Throughout the campaign process the one category in which President Bush never fell behind John Kerry in the polls was being a strong leader. He then takes a hard line and in the end made character—not his record—the issue as more Americans consider as themselves as conservatives than liberals.²⁴ Bush sounded as if he was running as an outsider and this bodes well for the expansion of the Republican Party. His loyal campaign team is pretty much focused on their job. This sense of discipline proved effective on election day, as no U.S. President except President Bush had won with an approval rating below 50% so late in the campaign.²⁵

By winning the 2004 election George W. Bush and his advisor Karl Rove who throughout the campaign process pretty much reflected their populist egalitarian instincts have proven remarkably shrewd in their reading of American

²² Andrew Sullivan, "Why Old Labels Don't Stick," in *Time*, 1 November 2004: 35.

²³ *Ibid.*

²⁴ Nancy Gibbs and John F. Dickerson, "Person of the Year," in *Time*, 27 December, 2004-3 January, 2005: 24.

²⁵ *Ibid.*

cultural trends. They managed to create the potential of a durable long-term majority by acknowledging the authenticity of the beliefs of the Latino community and Evangelical Christians.²⁶ Most Americans are socially conservative and President Bush does reflect the core beliefs of the majority of the public. For example, lower taxes appeal to the college-educated entrepreneurs, and social issues appeal to the older generation of deeply religious constituency.²⁷ George W. Bush doesn't make distinctions by race, and therefore doesn't care much for programs. He sees poverty as the absence of opportunity and therefore providing a better education will rectify the difference.²⁸

President Bush seemed to have succeeded in communicating issues that may have strengthened the predispositions of the American public.

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²⁷ Joseph Ellis, "A Missed Moment on Gay Rights," in Time, 27 December, 2004-3 January, 2003: 33.

²⁸ Joe Klein, "The Benetton-Ad Presidency," in Time, 27 December, 2004-3 January, 2003: 43.

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