

## RED AND BLUE NATION? CHARACTERISTICS AND CAUSES OF AMERICA'S POLARIZED POLITICS

(Brookings, December 2006)

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Did religious voters decide the 2004 election?

In his chapter on the political impact of religion in the forthcoming *Red and Blue Nation? Characteristics and Causes of America's Polarized Politics* (Brookings, December 2006), E.J. Dionne Jr. finds that religion did play an important role in determining how people voted in 2004, but so did “traditional drivers of political choice—class, race, region, economic circumstances, and views on foreign policy and on government’s role at home.” Religion is unquestionably a major source of political polarization in today’s electorate—but it is one among many.

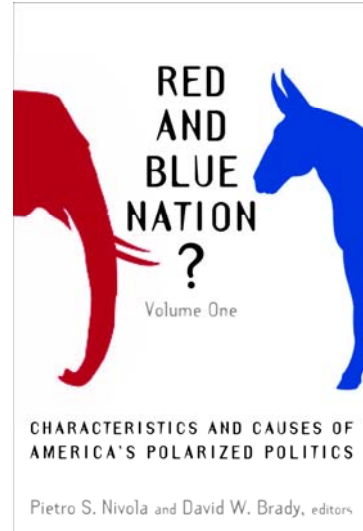
According to data from the 2004 exit polls, the most ardently religious voters (those who attended church services more than once a week) opted for Bush by a margin of 64 percent to 35 percent. At the other end of the spectrum, those who never attended church services voted for Kerry 62 percent to 36 percent. These data were widely interpreted as evidence that the 2004 election was a triumph of the religious voter over the secular voter.

Dionne, however, points out that Americans at the far ends of the religious spectrum, taken together, accounted for only about three in ten votes cast in the 2004 presidential election. Among the remaining voters, there was a definite relationship between frequency of church attendance and voting, but the relationship was not as strong as among the most and least religious voters. “Some of the passion underlying the nation’s current political polarization is religious passion,” but other passions also roil American politics.

Dionne points out that the 2004 exit polls show that black voters supported Kerry by a margin of 88 percent to 11 percent. Bush carried 56 percent of voters in households with annual incomes of more than \$50,000 (and 63 percent of voters with a household income of more than \$200,000), while Kerry carried 55 percent of the vote in households with annual incomes of less than \$50,000. Even Kerry’s strong showing among voters with postgraduate-level educations (he carried this group 55 percent to 44 percent) is tempered by the fact that Bush narrowly carried postgraduates whose household incomes exceeded \$100,000. Comparing the 2000 and 2004 exit poll data, Dionne finds that as many as 10 percent of Al Gore’s voters cast their ballots for Bush in 2004. He attributes much of this switch to the impact of the war on terror: of the Gore voters who voted for Bush, as many as eight in ten saw the war in Iraq as part of the war on terror.

Dionne concludes that Bush won reelection “not because religious conservatives were on the march, not because there is a right-wing majority in the United States, but because the president persuaded just enough of the nonconservative majority to go his way.” In the 2004 electorate, only 34 percent considered itself conservative. To win, the president needed to sway a significant minority of moderate voters. Thus did moderates, even in a polarized age, decide the election of 2004.

*E.J. Dionne Jr. is a senior fellow in the Brookings Institution’s Governance Studies program and a columnist for the Washington Post. His chapter on the role of religion as a source of political polarization will be published by the Brookings Institution Press in the forthcoming Red and Blue Nation: Characteristics and Causes of America’s Polarized Politics (Brookings, December 2006), edited by Pietro S. Nivola of the Brookings Institution and David W. Brady of the Hoover Institution. Red and Blue Nation? is a project sponsored by The Brookings Institution and Hoover Institution.*



For more information, please visit: <http://www.brookings.edu/gs/projects/redandbluenation.htm>

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Written by Richard Walker

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