

AN EARLY POST-MORTEM

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The third was the best of the debates. That was the best of Al Gore -- articulate, emphatic, confrontational, knowledgeable and animated. That was, by far, the best of George W. Bush, for the same reasons. It was good for the country to see two qualified candidates offer voters a clear choice between a moderate conservative and a moderate liberal, honorable alternatives both.

How will it all turn out? I believe that George Bush will win the presidency because Americans tend to vote on ideological grounds, whether they realize it or not. Generally, voters cast their ballots based on which candidate more closely expresses their own view of the world. The labels to shorthand these views are "conservative" and "liberal." In America today the moderate conservative viewpoint is more popular than the moderate liberal viewpoint. Both candidates know that. That's why liberals say "labels don't matter any more." That's why Bush kept talking about his philosophy, and Gore kept talking about his programs. At the presidential level, philosophy trumps programs.

There are a ton of polls that show roughly 40 percent of voters self-describe as moderates, 30 percent as conservative and 20 percent as liberal. Accordingly, to get to 50 percent, a conservative has to get about half of the moderates, while a liberal has to get about three-quarters of them. The race is in the center, but canted toward conservatives.

This has been the case since 1968. In the 1980s, the late Horace Busby called the phenomenon "the Republican lock." That

had a valid core, but was overstated. It was certainly no lock when a third force -- Ross Perot -- upset the balance in 1992 and 1996, helping elect and re-elect Bill Clinton.

But "it's the economy, stupid" -- the hallmark of the Democratic Party since the 1930s -- is also an over-simplification, albeit one that has transfixed pundits and model-makers. They can't figure out why Gore isn't way ahead in a time of prosperity. Fact is, even in the economically slow year of 1992, many polls showed that social issues were more important than economic ones. And from the *Wall Street Journal* of October 17, 2000, "When asked whether restoring moral and family values or maintaining economic growth was a higher priority, more voters said moral values, 43 percent to 31 percent, in the NBC-*WSJ* poll."

Gore had three opportunities to capture the center ground. He squandered two of them and never got a chance to use the third.

Early this year, he was faced with a primary challenge from Sen. Bill Bradley, who ran to the left of his own earlier positions expressed as a U.S. senator. In retrospect, it is clear that the vice president would have beaten Bradley one way or the other: He had the super-delegates, the money, the support of the party regulars. But Gore got into the Democratic primary game of "Lefter Than Thou." He squandered the opportunity of painting himself as a "Bill Clinton New Democrat," that is, a man of the political center, sort of.

Gore created a second opportunity for himself when he picked Joe Lieberman as his running mate in August. Lieberman, chairman of the moderate Democratic Leadership Council, is on the right wing of the left wing party, that is, near the center of

the American electorate. Good try. But Gore failed to follow up. There has been little evidence of a DLC-style campaign. Instead, Gore opted for business-bashing, focused on "Big Oil," "Big Drug Companies" and "HMOs." Today, more than half of all Americans are invested in the stock market, and most every portfolio has energy and medical stocks in it. Businessmen have become cultural heroes. We've decoded the human genome and are waiting for payoffs in better health – and Gore is banging his silly tambourine about fighting for the people against the powerful. Give I a break.

Meanwhile, Joe Lieberman will be reelected Senator from Connecticut and will likely be a major presidential contender in 2004.

The third opportunity never came about. Bush was supposed to be revealed as an empty suit. He ain't, as he showed in the final debate. Yes, Gore is a good debater. But Bush kept saying that he had a philosophy, that it leaned toward trusting the people, not the federal government. Gore rebutted by listing another dozen federal programs, without saying why, because if he did, voters would mark him as a liberal big spender.

By filling out his suit, Bush broke the last tackle before open field. And so, my guess is that the margin may not be razor-thin. I think Bush will win by 5 percentage points, give or take a couple.

Ben Wattenberg is a senior fellow at the American Enterprise Institute and is moderator of PBS's "Think Tank."

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