

Democrats in defeat ponder 'values gap' Centrist Democrats call on party to recast "moral issues": Centrist Democrats call on party to recast "moral issues"

News in the [November 30, 2004](#) issue

When it comes to the Democratic Party's on-again, off-again search for a message that would appeal to religious voters, any metaphor will do: asleep at the wheel, stumbling in a darkened room, a code-blue emergency.

Clergyman and ex-Congressman Bob Edgar prefers a comparison to the Israelites wandering the Sinai Desert. "Look, it took Moses 40 years to get his people out of the wilderness, and we've been in the wilderness for 25 years," said Edgar, a United Methodist who heads the National Council of Churches. "And we're not there yet, but we can see the Promised Land."

As Democrats collected themselves following Senator John Kerry's defeat this month, many said their biggest challenge would be narrowing the "values gap" that sent many voters into President Bush's column. It could also signal a policy battle for the heart and soul of the party.

Exit polls indicate that one in five voters listed "moral values" as their most important issue, outranking terrorism, the Iraq war and the economy. Those voters went for Bush, 79-18 percent, over Kerry. However, some analysts said that the ethical way to deal with terrorism, Iraq and the economy is often not included as a "moral value" issue. Pollsters never asked what voters meant by "moral values." Democrats call it code words for being antigay and antiabortion.

But if one is talking about traditional "religious" conversation, then political observers, including many Democrats, say the larger problem for the party is its

reluctance—or inability—to talk about faith with voters in a meaningful way, especially in Bush-friendly states.

Kerry senior adviser Mike McCurry said his attempts to spark a faith-based discussion were on the right track but clearly did not go far enough. “It ought to be as easy for a Democrat to meet and socialize with people in a church social hall as it is in a union hall,” said McCurry, a former press secretary for President Bill Clinton.

Kerry, a Catholic with a New England reticence about open displays of religiosity, intermittently challenged Bush from various pulpits with scriptural warnings that “faith without works is dead.” Both the campaign and the Democratic National Committee hired full-time directors of religious outreach and recruited progressive faith leaders as surrogates, but many said the efforts were too little, too late.

Experts say the problem is twofold: one part policy, one part perception. On policy, conservatives say the Democrats simply did not have a platform that appealed to churchgoing voters who were galvanized by gay marriage, abortion and faith in the public square.

“On all three issues, the Democratic Party comes up short,” said Richard Cizik, vice president for governmental affairs at the National Association of Evangelicals. “And its candidates come up short. There’s just no escaping that reality.” Democrats say there is little wiggle room to change policy on, say, abortion, which McCurry called a “rock-solid pillar” of the party’s platform.

Centrist Democrats say the party needs to recast “moral issues” to include issues like poverty, homelessness and health care. The bottom line, experts say, is that the category must include more than sexual morality.

Among other postelection assessments in RNS stories:

- “When you start talking about moral issues, it’s got to be a book that has more than three pages in it,” said Jim Forbes, pastor of New York’s Riverside Church.
- “I think Democrats, if they are wise, all of them are going to Bible school, and they are going to learn the language of values, relearn the language of values again,” said Robert L. Borosage, co-director of the Campaign for America’s Future, a progressive policy organization. “That’s a grand Democratic tradition from Dr. King, to Jimmy Carter, to Bill Clinton,” he said at a National Press Club news conference in

Washington.

- “The Democrats will have a hard time electing a president until they are more sensitive to the concerns of the churchgoing populace,” said Stephen Monsma, research fellow at the Henry Institute for the Study of Christianity and Politics at Calvin College. “There are ways they can do this and still largely maintain their liberal issue positions, but they must become much more sophisticated in doing so,” said Monsma, who has held legislative posts in Michigan as a Democrat.
- Under a “moral values” mandate, the Bush reelection will lead to the appointment of justices who would overturn the Supreme Court’s *Roe v. Wade* decision on abortion rights, predicts the executive director of Americans United for Separation of Church and State. “What we could see is what I call theocracy lite, a system whereby our courts deny they are implementing the doctrines of ultraconservative Christians groups as the law of the land, even as they do exactly that,” said Barry Lynn at a news conference held by the Washington-based Religious Coalition for Reproductive Choice. RCRC President Carlton Veazey objected to the notion that Bush won because of a religious-values advantage. “Politics won the election, not religion,” said Veazey.
- Cautioned Episcopal priest Tom Ehrich: “Cultural debates engage our passions, but they usually aren’t the real thing going on. Deeper control issues are at work. In the 19th century, for example, America’s rapacious plutocrats amassed wealth by diverting people’s attention to race conflict, and they averted the logical consequences of financial meltdown by buying a war with Spain. Throughout the 20th century, industrial magnates fought against fair wages and decent working conditions by encouraging fear of socialism. Whenever the spotlight shifts to a burning moral concern, we need to ask whether it is a cover for something else, and who is fanning religious flames for reasons that have nothing to do with faith itself.”