The 2004 Election and the Bush Administration’s Two ‘Conversations’

The 2004 election and the Bush Administration’s Two ‘Conversations’ looks at the changing character of the American electorate and the implications of this for Republican strategists. It suggests that the White House has sought to shore up support from among its core supporters but also reach out to swing voters. However, it argues, election campaigns have a logic of their own. The 2004 campaign has been reshaped by the Iraq war, the state of the economy, the same-sex marriage debate and the character of the Democratic and Republican national conventions.

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Over the past few decades, scholarly studies and popular commentaries have spoken of ‘partisan dealignment’. The American voter, it was said, had become increasingly detached from the parties. There were increasingly fewer party ‘identifiers’, particularly ‘strong party identifiers’, who were firmly committed to either the Republicans or Democrats. As a corollary, there was greater electoral volatility as voters switched allegiance at successive elections or engaged in ‘split-ticket voting’ whereby they voted in different ways – on the same day – in federal, state and local contests. The process of dealignment was, observers argued, making election outcomes more uncertain and represented, according to some, a prelude to a fundamental political realignment in which the principal parties would restructure themselves and new party formations might emerge.

The ‘partisan dealignment’ school has, however, become progressively less vocal in recent years. There are different reasons for this. When considered over the decades, the electoral statistics provide only a limited basis for claiming that there was a sustained and steady long-term decline in the proportion of party identifiers. Instead, the numbers were affected by relatively short-term factors or specific political processes. The Vietnam war and the travails of the Nixon presidency took their toll on established party loyalties. The extension of the right to vote to 18-21 year-olds – many of whom were disengaged from the political process – also had an impact. At the same time, the Democrats lost the allegiance of two groupings that had formerly leaned heavily towards the Party. Many white southerners feared the desegregation process while others believed that the country’s religious foundations were being undermined. They found a political home in the Republican Party. At the same time, significant numbers of white manual workers in cities such as Chicago reacted against the Democra-
tic Party’s apparent capture by committed liberals. They resented seemingly excessive federal government spending and what they saw as the repudiation of traditional cultural values.

Against this background, ‘partisan dealignment’ was less widely used. Indeed, observers began to represent American political culture in very different terms. In place of volatility, they described the country in terms of two fixed and conflicting camps. James Davidson Hunter’s 1992 book, *Culture Wars*, described the growing tensions between ‘progressives’ and ‘traditionalists’ and the way in which the divide between them had displaced older cleavages such as the split between Roman Catholics and Protestants. There was, it was said, a process of polarisation as the two sides pulled further apart and increasingly fewer people were left occupying the middle ground.

Many of those who spoke of ‘culture wars’ saw it as a series of battles between the regions. Older notions of a divide between the east coast and the ‘heartland’ were brought back into play as commentators talked of ‘metro versus retro’. From this perspective, the metropolitan regions around the ‘rim’ of the US – including the coastal strips as well as cities such as Chicago in the north and Houston in the south – leaned towards cultural liberalism while the mountain states and the rural, the midwest and much of the south were much more traditionalist in character.

All of this had political implications. In 2000, a *Newsweek* map depicted the way each of the counties had voted. It showed concentrations of blue (representing the counties where a majority had backed Al Gore) in the multiethnic ‘rim’ areas and very large swathes of red (denoting the counties where the majority of votes were cast for George W. Bush) across much of the rest of the country. In terms of votes, the two sides were, of course, almost evenly matched. Popular commentaries talked of a ‘red-blue’ or ‘50-50’ nation.

There are, of course, profound dangers of caricature and exaggeration. Many within the ‘metro’ regions – particularly within the racial and ethnic minorities – have not embraced cultural liberalism. At the same time, as Alan Wolfe argues in *One Nation After All*, those living in the ‘retro’ regions may dislike homosexuality but there is a still – amongst many at least – a tolerance of difference. Furthermore, there does not appear to have been a process of polarisation. Attitudes towards some core issues such as abortion have remained broadly stable over the past few decades.

A further qualification should also be noted. Despite talk of a ‘red-blue’ nation, party lines are not always structured around the divide. At sub-presidential level, voters in ‘red’ states such as the Dakotas, Kansas, or Oklahoma have backed Democrats. At the same time, New York City – which is firmly ‘blue’ in presidential contests – has now elected two Republican mayors in succession. However, in almost all these cases, those elected – or seeking election – have had to compromise with the prevailing culture. Many of the Democrats running for Congress in ‘red’ states have distanced themselves from John Kerry, supported efforts to prohibit gay marriage, and endorsed George Bush’s tax cuts.

**Divisions and tensions**

However, notwithstanding all of this, it would be a mistake to underestimate contemporary divisions and tensions. Talk of a ‘purple’ nation rather than a country divided between ‘red’ and ‘blue’ goes too far. Although there was a temporary sense of unity and a rallying around the flag in the wake of September 11th attacks, feelings and sentiments have hardened in recent years. This is evident – in its sharpest and most abrasive form – in the ‘hate industries’ that emerged during both the Clinton and Bush eras. While President Clinton was at times the author of his own political misfortunes, he was subjected to a barrage of allegations. Although initially promoted by journals such as *The American Spectator*, many of these claims were later repeated in sections of the mainstream media. They suggested, for example, that both the president and his wife were involved in the cocaine trade and the killing of opponents. Since Clinton left office, sections of the conservative movement have continued their efforts to deligitimise those associated with liberalism. Bestselling books by Michael Savage, the vitriolic talk show host, and Anne Coulter, a conservative journalist, assert that liberals are, by definition, guilty of treason.

President Bush also provokes strident forms of opposition. Hostility to the president’s politics and personality grew markedly as the immediate shock of September 11th receded and the death toll in Iraq steadily rose. The proportion of the population who disapproved of the president and his actions rose.
from 25 per cent in April 2003 to 45 per cent in June 2004 (Pew Center for the People and the Press: 2004) Against this background, there was a receptive market for Michael Moore’s film, Fahrenheit 9-11 – which seemed to accuse the Bush family of collusion with Saudi Arabia – and books such as Al Franken’s Lies and the Lying Liars Who Tell Them: A Fair And Balanced Look at the Right, and Jack Huberman’s The Bush Hater’s Handbook.

The hardening of opinion was evident in other ways. As the 2004 election approached, the polls suggested that there were relatively few undecided voters who were wavering between George W. Bush and Massachusetts Senator John Kerry. Overwhelming majorities of likely voters were already firmly committed supporters of one camp or the other. A USA Today / CNN / Gallup poll conducted at the end of July and the beginning of August 2004 suggested that 16 per cent might change their mind between then and election day. (USA Today: 2004)

By the end of August, the Los Angeles Times reported that just 5 per cent of likely voters were undecided. (Pollingreport.com: 2004)

The two ‘conversations’
Both the Republicans and Democrats have, therefore, been compelled to hold two different ‘conversations’. Within the ‘battleground’ states – where the outcome is far from certain – they have had to speak to their committed supporters – whose turnout on election day had to be assured – and at the same time to the relatively small yet still vital tranche of undecided voters, many of whom occupy the middle ground. Because the Democratic and Republican camps are more or less evenly matched, electoral victory will be dependent upon a campaign’s ability to increase turnout and win over these waverers by very small increments.

This poses particular dilemmas for the Republicans. Many grassroots Democrats have been driven by their opposition to the conservative right – and President Bush in particular – rather than a commitment to reform or radicalism. Their willingness to back Senator John Kerry – a long-established Washington insider – as the Party’s 2004 presidential candidate rather than a figure such as former Vermont governor Howard Dean who might have made fewer concessions or compromises is testimony to this. However, many Republican supporters had a more developed and less pliable agenda.

Nonetheless, despite these formidable difficulties, the Bush White House – and the campaign teams that directed his 2000 and 2004 presidential election bids – appears to have a solid understanding of the challenges facing them. Alongside themes such as national security and steadfastness they talked – at one and the same time – to both core supporters in the grassroots right and more moderate ‘swing’ voters.

The grassroots right and the Bush record
Although there is an extensive ideological overlap between the two traditions, the Republican Party’s core supporters are divided between economic and social conservatives. The Bush record offered reassurance to both. For their part, economic conservatives regarded the tax cuts that the Bush White House proposed to Congress as a stimulus to entrepreneurship and the first step along a road that will compel future administrations and members of Congress to reduce government spending so that the country is not faced by crippling budget deficits. They similarly embraced the White House proposals for the partial privatisation of social security and the reductions in inheritance tax.

Social conservatives – many of whom are associated with the Christian groups that collectively comprise the ‘religious right’ – have periodically had their reservations about the administration but have also spoken of their ‘friends’ in the White House. Conservative judges were nominated to the federal appeals’ courts encouraging hopes that abortion might be restricted. After some hesitation, in February 2004, Bush endorsed the Federal Marriage Amendment (FMA) which sought to prohibit same-sex marriage. Furthermore, the administration significantly increased the funding available for abstinence-only sex education programmes. The White House also proposed legislation ending ‘partial-birth abortion’ and severely restricted embryonic stem cell research. Bush also sought to ensure that the reauthorisation of welfare reform included extended funding for programmes promoting ‘healthy marriages’.

There were other initiatives that drew support in more or less equal measure from both strains within the conservative movement but which won fewer plaudits across the Atlantic, particularly in the countries of ‘old Europe’. The Bush White House rejected the International Criminal Court, backed
national missile defence, and refused to accept the restrictions demanded under the terms of the Kyoto Protocol on climate change. Above all else, it asserted the right of the US to take military action in Iraq alongside a ‘coalition of the willing’ despite the fears of nations such as France and Germany.

‘Compassionate conservatism’ and the ‘swing’ vote

However, although policy initiatives such as these won the hearts and minds of strong Republican identifiers and led some European observers to conclude that the administration was a prisoner of the conservative right, the politics of Bush White House have had a dual-track character. Alongside the measures that won backing and support from committed conservatives, the administration has approached other issues in a more moderate and restrained way. To the chagrin of some on the right, the 2000 election campaign was structured around a plea for ‘compassionate conservatism’. This enabled the Bush team to emphasise the importance of addressing issues such as urban poverty. It also allowed Bush to distance himself from the confrontationalism of the mid-1990s – when Congressional Republicans under the leadership of House Speaker, Newt Gingrich had sought to dismantle the Washington bureaucracy and undermine the Clinton presidency – and from the seeming intolerance of those associated with the Christian right. Bush’s ‘compassionate conservatism’ envisaged a more positive role for government than had been envisaged by either Newt Gingrich or former president Ronald Reagan. Indeed, during the Bush administration, the size and scope of government grew rapidly.

‘W-ism’ – as the administration’s thinking has been dubbed – also addressed some of the issues that had traditionally been the prerogative of Democrats. Although the right had long advocated the introduction of school vouchers – a simulated market mechanism – the 2002 No Child Left Behind Act that Bush promoted instead rested on the testing of school students, teacher training, support for those with special needs, and increased federal government funding. Bush also put forward plans for immigration reform based around the granting of temporary legal status to undocumented immigrants who would become ‘guest workers’. Although the 2004 Republican party platform endorsed the proposals, they attracted fierce criticism from many on the right. As Richard Lessner, executive director of the American Conservative Union put it:

‘This unfortunate initiative allows those who enter America illegally to become legal residents ... This idea was D.O.A. among conservatives when the president first broached it, and it is still offensive.’ (quoted in Kirkpatrick: 2004)

The administration has also been more equivocal towards gay rights than social conservatives would have wished or it has sometimes appeared. The president signed legislation that incorporated benefits for the same-sex partners of firefighters and police officers killed in the September 11th attacks and allowed the registration of domestic partnerships in the District of Columbia. A number of openly gay individuals were appointed to positions within the executive branch. The Log Cabin Republicans – the principal gay and lesbian organisation within the Party – boasted of its ability to reach senior decision-makers. Furthermore, there was a long period of apparent hesitation before the president gave his backing to the FMA in unambiguous terms.

Campaign 2004

The 2004 Republican presidential campaign continued the dual strategy. It sought both to mobilise the party’s core vote so as to maximise turnout and – at the same time – win over those moderate ‘swing’ voters who still remained undecided. Although, at the end of August, John Kerry was being portrayed in profoundly negative terms, moderation – in terms of both style and policy – was also in the ascendancy. First Lady Laura Bush and the couple’s twin daughters were given greater prominence than earlier. For his part, vice-president Dick Cheney, seemed to suggest a softening on gay marriage. He said, in response to a question, that he personally favoured allowing the individual states to decide whether or not same-sex marriage should be allowed.

Covert tactics

Some observers suggest that the Republicans also employed more covert tactics as the election approached. There was, as one commentator put it, a low road as well as a high road. During August 2004, some Vietnam veterans – perhaps in associa-
tion with Republican strategists and donors – challenged Kerry’s account of his service in Vietnam. Their television advertisements had an impact not only because they denied Kerry’s honesty and probity but because the Democratic national convention and campaign placed such an emphasis on Kerry’s military credentials.

While only a limited number of television advertisements were initially aired, the Swift Boat Veterans for Truth’s allegations attracted widespread attention on the internet, the cable television news channels, and the press. Indeed, they dominated the issue-agenda for much of August. Although references to Vietnam could lead to comparisons with Iraq and might invite further investigation of the president’s military service, some of the polls seemed to be shifting in Bush’s favour by the end of the month.

Organisations such as the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) – one of the most influential and established black interest groups – suggested that another covert tactic was being employed. They asserted that Republican officials in states such as Florida were seeking to remove black voters – who are loyal to the Democrats by overwhelming margins – from the voting rolls. Between four and six million qualified African-Americans, it was said, had been disenfranchised in 2000 because of either registration procedures or technological problems with voting machinery. There were fears that the number would be larger still in 2004 (Becker: 2004)

**Events and developments**

However, although Karl Rove – President Bush’s principal domestic policy adviser and the architect of his earlier election victories – is sometimes depicted as a Svengali-like master of events, election teams cannot determine the nature of a campaign. The months preceding the election illustrate the importance of structural trends, unexpected developments, and other ‘political actors’ besides the strategists in determining the overall course of events.

**Economic uncertainty**

Seen in terms of economic growth rates alone, the 2001 recession was relatively mild and short-lived. Nonetheless, it dashed the hopes of those who had depicted the boom years of the late 1990s as the harbinger of a new economic paradigm. More significantly, the recovery – at least if measured through the indicators that have a direct impact on everyday lives – was slow, hesitant and uneven. Unemployment rates are always lagged behind the business cycle but – despite the White House’s hopes – they failed to fall significantly. By the beginning of September, 5.5 per cent remained jobless.

The downturn would, in itself, have taken a toll upon the president’s fortunes. However, its political consequences were magnified because Bush had placed such emphasis on the tax cuts that his administration promoted. He repeatedly claimed that they would provide a powerful economic stimulus.

The state of the economy is also significant because, as Jacob S. Hacker has suggested, it is tied to a much broader sense of insecurity about the future. Americans are now working longer hours than they did a generation ago. Second or even third jobs are widespread. Debt levels are rising. Fourteen million more people lack health insurance coverage than two decades ago. Redeployment is commonplace. Retirement pension arrangements lack the certainty of earlier years. Long-term family income levels are much more unstable than in the past. (Hacker: 2004)

### Table 1: Economic indicators (2001 – 04)

<table>
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<tr>
<th></th>
<th>2001</th>
<th>2002</th>
<th>2003</th>
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<td>Growth (% change of GDP)</td>
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<td>1.9</td>
<td>3.0</td>
<td>4.5</td>
<td>2.8</td>
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<tr>
<td>Unemployment (% of workforce)</td>
<td>4.7</td>
<td>5.8</td>
<td>6.0</td>
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The Iraq war and terrorism

Backing for military intervention in Iraq declined steadily as events in Iraq defied the hopes of the Pentagon strategists and the conflict became a long, bloody war of attrition. By April, opponents of US intervention outnumbered its supporters. The transfer of formal power from the US-led administration to an interim Iraqi government in June seems to have had no significant impact on popular sentiments.

However, there is a paradox. Although intervention in Iraq was represented as a component part of the overall war on terror, attitudes towards President Bush’s record in confronting terrorism are markedly more positive. Although his lead on the issue fell during the first eight months of 2004, there was still a 15 point gap between those supporting Bush’s handling of the war on terror and his critics. The lead seems to have been created by a belief that the president had stood firm and – as a corollary – a fear that Kerry lacked consistency or resolution. The association of the Bush White House with stability and security perhaps represented the president’s greatest political asset.

A tale of two conventions

The Democrats’ national convention was held in mid-July and emphasised John Kerry’s service in Vietnam and military credentials. Indeed, its spirit was captured in Kerry’s opening comments when he said ‘reporting for duty’. However, as Karl Rove was to remark, the only aspect of Kerry’s life with which the American public was already familiar was his period in Vietnam. The convention simply reiterated this almost endlessly and missed the opportunity to establish other campaign themes. It also – as noted above – opened up an opportunity for some military veterans who were critical of Kerry’s record and his later participation in the antiwar movement.

The Republican convention was held at the beginning of September. Its timing alone allowed the Party to make a firm mark on the latter stages of the campaign. Furthermore, in a bid to win over the few remaining ‘swing’ voters, Republican moderates – such as former New York mayor, Rudolph Giuliani and California governor, Arnold Schwarzenegger – were assigned key speaking spots. Fred Greenstein of Princeton University has emphasised the contrast between the 2004 and the 1992 convention which is remembered for Patrick J. Buchanan’s uncompromising commitment to wage the culture war:

‘The president’s father was very much hampered by his choice of speakers which was counter-pro-

Table 2: Attitudes towards the Iraq war (2004)

<table>
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<tr>
<th></th>
<th>6-11 January</th>
<th>1-4 April</th>
<th>3-13 June</th>
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<td>Disapprove</td>
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<td>53</td>
<td>51</td>
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Table 3: Attitudes towards the war on terror (2003-04)

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<tr>
<td>Approve</td>
<td>70</td>
<td>58</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>51</td>
<td>53</td>
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<tr>
<td>Disapprove</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>38</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Question text: ‘Do you approve or disapprove of the way George W. Bush is handling the campaign against terrorism?’ N = 1009. Source: adapted from CBS News Poll (2004), www.pollingreport.com/terror.com
They presented a very harsh vision of the Republican Party... McCain, Giuliani and Schwarzenegger are a sign that the president, having looked so far to the right, is suddenly wanting to appear very much in the centre.' (quoted in Massie: 2004)

Speakers such as Schwarzenegger revived talk of 'compassionate conservatism'. There were sustained appeals for the immigrant vote which traditionally leans disproportionately towards the Democrats. Alongside this, however, the convention sought to motivate core supporters by intensifying the criticisms of Kerry and the Democrats, invoking memories of the September 11th attacks, and placing a renewed emphasis on Bush as the commander-in-chief and the nation’s guardian.

**Same-sex marriage**

Despite the efforts of the Bush team to ensure – particularly from mid-August onwards – that the campaign tacked towards the centre and distanced itself from the ‘religious right’, the issue of same-sex marriage began to assume a dynamic of its own.

What was the background to this? In November 2003, the Massachusetts Supreme Judicial Court acknowledged by a majority of four to three that although it owed ‘great deference to the Legislature to decide social and policy issues’, it could identify ‘no rational reason’ to deny same-sex couples the right to marry that the law extended to heterosexuals. The Court allowed a 180 day stay so that the state legislature could '.. take such action as it may deem appropriate in light of this opinion.' Faced by this, the state legislature eventually committed itself to a constitutional amendment which prohibited same-sex marriage but instead established civil unions. The amendment has to be passed again in the next legislative session and then ratified by the Massachusetts electorate. The process would be completed in 2006 at the earliest.

Confronted by the inflexibility of the Court and the length of time required by the amendment process, Massachusetts’ Republican governor, Mitt Romney, reluctantly urged officials to obey the law and, on May 17th, same-sex marriage was legalised. In contrast with the marriages performed at about the same time by dissident officials in some counties and cities in other parts of the country, most notably San Francisco, the marriage ceremonies in Massachusetts had the full weight of the law.

What will be the political consequences of this? Again, developments in Missouri – one of the most contested ‘battleground’ states – may offer an answer. Groups, churches and individuals – particularly those associated with evangelical Protestantism – mobilised. At the beginning of August, a referendum was held to consider a proposed amendment to the state constitution that would define marriage as only between a man and a woman. It passed by a margin that exceeded the expectations of its most committed proponents, attracting 71 per cent backing (Washington Post: 2004) More significantly, the vote, which was held on the same day as statewide primaries, attracted a turnout of 42.8 per cent. In Missouri, primaries generally draw just 15 to 25 per cent of the electorate to the polls. (Detroit News: 2004).4

At the time of writing, referendums on proposed amendments to state constitutions that would prohibit same-sex marriage are pending in other states. Louisiana’s ballot will be on September 18th. At least eight states will vote on election day – November 2nd – itself. Some – such as that put forward in Arkansas – not only define marriage as a union of a man and a woman, but also forbid the recognition of any ‘legal status for unmarried persons which is identical or substantially similar to marital status..’ (quoted in Greenberg (2004) This would prohibit the creation – by either the state legislature or the state courts – of civil unions or domestic partnership arrangements.

Some other state legislatures have rejected calls for referendums on constitutional amendments. However, there may be a political price for this. In Kansas, Bill Kassebaum, a moderate Republican state legislator seeking re-election, was defeated in the primary contest. His defeat was attributed, in part, to his opposition to a referendum. He had argued that a state statute prohibiting same-sex marriage was sufficient.

All of this may help the Republicans by bringing voters associated with the Christian right to the polls although there is some uncertainty about this because the issue may also boost turnout among Catholic Democrats. However, there are dangers for the Bush campaign. Significant numbers of suburban voters – particularly women – could be alienated if the Republicans can be labeled ‘intolerant’ or
doctrinaire. Furthermore, the issue may be seen as a distraction when the US faces more pressing issues. This may be the reason why, in late August, Dick Cheney appeared to speak in much more moderate, personal and cautious terms.

**The right direction**

It is impossible – at the time of writing – to forecast the election outcome. As has been noted, much will depend on the ability of the campaigns to ensure that there is a high level of turnout among their supporters. Although he is on the ballot in fewer states than in 2000 and is likely to gain only small numbers of votes, Ralph Nader’s candidacy could also affect the outcome.

However, so far as the relatively small numbers of undecided voters are concerned, issues and personalities may not be decisive. If they vote – and turnout among swing voters could be disproportionately low – they may not be guided by a rational calculus based upon a sober evaluation of the issues but instead by a generalised sense of their own wellbeing and almost inchoate perceptions of the direction in which the country is heading. Indeed, some observers have suggested that the question asked by some pollsters, ‘is the US ... headed in the right direction or ... on the wrong track’, is the most accurate way of judging whether an incumbent president will be re-elected. In contrast to 1984 and 1996, when Ronald Reagan and Bill Clinton were re-elected by large margins, the poll findings spelt serious danger for George W. Bush.

Nonetheless, against the background of a divided nation, ‘W-ism’ has much greater strategic depth and substance than Bush’s critics – particularly those in Europe – often suggest. As has been argued, it addresses two distinct and separate groups. Taken together with efforts to discredit John Kerry’s record and judgement, and attempts to associate the Democrats with disloyalty to the nation, it may yet enable George W. Bush to secure a second term.

**Notes**

1. Some of this has been charted in David Brock (2002) *Blinded by the Right: The Conscience of an Ex-Conservative*.

2. The White House’s efforts to ensure that its ties with both economic conservatives – who stress the need for minimal government – and social conservatives – who emphasise moral traditionalism – remain secure may well have also been shaped by memories of George H. W. Bush’s administration. During the 1989-93 period, infighting among conservatives and the alienation of sections of the right laid the ground for Patrick J. Buchanan’s 1992 primary challenge and Bill Clinton’s victory in the November contest.

3. The Swift Boat Veterans for Truth was a ‘527’. 527s – so called because of a clause in the tax code – are organisations that undertake political activities but, so long as they do not directly call for a vote either for or against a candidate, their spending is unrestricted by law. Although 527s are an established feature of US presidential elections, the 2002 campaign finance reform act restricted spending by the parties. Therefore, wealthy donors – including George Soros – instead offered funds to 527s so that, in 2004, the scope and scale of their activities increased dramatically. While the Swift Boat Veterans appear to have had the greatest impact, many of the 527s leant towards the Democrats and the television advertisements that they funded – as well as individual donations to the Kerry campaign – helped close the ‘money gap’ between the Democrats and Republicans.

4. The scale of the victory of those supporting the amendment to the Missouri constitution is all the more significant because gay rights groups spent about $450,000 while their opponents spent only $19,000.
Literature


Massie, Alex (2004), ‘Republican line-up strays from convention’, *The Scotsman*, June 30th.


