

6 *One Step Forward, Two Steps Back*

The Compassionate Conservative
versus the Florida Recount

SO FAR, I HAVE EXAMINED three obstacles—history, the predispositions of voters, and the media—that political parties face in attempting to reshape their images. Chapter 6 explores the role of one additional barrier—the parties themselves. Specifically, I investigate what happens when a political party does not convey a consistent image of itself. As discussed earlier, the incorporation of new information into individuals' party images depends on existing perceptions of the party. People more willingly encode information that is consistent with their extant partisan stereotypes. If citizens encounter both a new picture of a party and an alternative version of the party that conforms to the old, they will discount the new projected party image. Therefore, a party's attempt to modify its image is largely contingent on its ability to maintain the new projected version of itself. When the party retreats from its new image, citizens' perceptions of the party will revert back to the original picture.

With respect to the example used throughout this book—the GOP's attempt to reshape its racial symbolism—I examined the Republican Party's image in light of the dispute over the 2000 election. The Republican Party's alleged participation in activities aimed at disenfranchising minorities directly conflicted with the picture of the party painted during the 2000 Republican National Convention. As a result, the GOP's attempt to improve its racial symbolism was subverted.

Dimpled Chads and Disenfranchised Voters

On January 20, 2001, George W. Bush was inaugurated as the 43rd president of the United States of America. Not since the election of

1876, however, had a presidential election generated such controversy. George W. Bush received 50,456,002 votes, 47.87 percent of the popular vote. His opponent, Al Gore, received 48.38 percent of the popular vote. Nevertheless, Bush won the election by winning Florida's 25 Electoral College votes. Bush had won Florida, the state where his brother served as governor, by 537 votes. Ironically, Florida, one of the disputed states in the 1876 election, lay at the heart of the controversy 124 years later. As Walton and Smith (2003) explained,

The 2000 election is controversial because in effect the “loser” became the “winner.” It is also controversial because there were widespread allegations of voting irregularities and suppression of the black vote in Florida—the state that gave Bush his one-vote margin of victory in the electoral college. Finally, the 2000 election is controversial because the Supreme Court affected its outcome by stopping an ongoing recount of the Florida vote. (160)

Many observers argued that Bush's win was illegitimate and that the presidency had been stolen or at least bought.

The mainstream discussion of the election centered on miscast or uncounted ballots. As Kellner (2001) explained, “[I]t was revealed on November 8 that many usually Democratic Party voters in Palm Beach County, Florida, had accidentally voted for ultra-rightwing candidate Pat Buchanan because of the confusing, and allegedly illegal, ‘butterfly’ ballot that listed the candidates side by side with arrows pointing to the holes to be punched” (31–32). Furthermore, close to 20,000 ballots had been disqualified as a result of faulty voting equipment. Still-attached chads¹ prevented citizens' votes from being counted.

Along with the discussions of dimpled chads and butterfly ballots were allegations of corruption. Several media accounts indicated that Florida Secretary of State Katherine Harris “commissioned a Republican-connected firm to ‘cleanse’ voter lists of felons, and in so doing had wiped off around 100,000 legitimate voters, mostly African American and poor voters who tended to vote Democrat” (Kellner 2001, 39). Moreover, several reports indicated that African Americans had been harassed and denied the right to vote when they arrived at vari-

1. According to the *Merriam-Webster Collegiate Dictionary*, 11th ed., chads are “small pieces of paper or cardboard produced in punching paper tape or data cards.”

ous voting sites (Kellner 2001, 33). Finally, *USA Today*, in conjunction with several other newspapers, found that “in precincts where blacks were the majority, 8.9 percent of the votes were uncounted compared to 2.4 percent in white majority precincts and 3 percent statewide.” In addition, this study found that all of the precincts with the highest percentage of spoiled ballots had African American voting-age populations of 80 percent or higher (Walton and Smith 2003, 162). Thus, like the election of 1876, the 2000 election proved detrimental to African American voters.

African American leaders saw the Florida situation as just one of many incidents of election fraud. In an issue of *Crisis* published after the 2000 election, the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) listed several instances of vote suppression committed by the Republican Party over the preceding two decades. Each incident involved the intimidation of African American and Hispanic voters. The NAACP argued that “whether in the East, South, or far West, voter suppression of black and brown people is a favorite tactic of Republican strategists” (Strickland 2000, 13).

Members of the Congressional Black Caucus (CBC) protested the election results. During the certification of the Electoral College vote, 12 CBC members “tried in vain to block the counting of Florida’s 25 electoral votes, protesting that black voters had been disenfranchised” (Mitchell 2001, 17). When Bush was formally elected, 20 members of the CBC protested by leaving the proceedings. In addition, several members of the CBC as well as thousands of other blacks protested Bush’s inauguration by holding a demonstration outside the Supreme Court building (Walton and Smith 2003, 165).

The treatment of black and Hispanic voters certainly contradicted the theme of inclusion and diversity put forth by Bush and the Republican Party during the course of the election. How did these events affect the Republican Party? Did the dispute over the presidency undo the headway the Republicans had made during the 2000 convention? To answer these questions, I first examined the media’s coverage of the Republican Party during this time. Using articles appearing in the *New York Times* (a mainstream news source) and the *New York Amsterdam News* (an African American news source) from Election Day 2000 until December 13, when Al Gore conceded the election, I explored the extent to which the media connected the GOP to the Florida recount and whether the media linked the recount to a discussion of race. Uti-

lizing the 2002 American National Election Study, I then examined whether the election affected assessments of the Republican Party. Specifically, I explored whether questions of the election's legitimacy affected evaluations of the Republicans' ability to represent minorities.

The Media and the 2000 Election

In discussing the Republican Party in the postelection period, the media overwhelmingly focused on the party's role in the Florida recount efforts. Of the articles about the Republican Party in the sample, 63 percent discussed the Florida recount. For example, a *New York Times* article reported,

In West Palm Beach, the canvassing board plodded through the recount here as a Republican rally of some 300 stopped traffic outside, waving signs that read, "Democrats Are Bottom Feeders" and "Al Gore Is a Liar" and others with clever obscenities. (Bragg and Holloway 2000, A1)

The discussion also included the Republican Party's use of absentee ballots and whether these ballots should be counted. In addition, the media focused on the partisan argument over whether all of the ballots should be recounted by hand or by machine and who should oversee the recount.

Media coverage of the Republican Party also featured discussions of the Republican convention, even though more than three months had passed since the convention's end. Specifically, 6 percent of the articles discussed the convention. Much of this coverage centered on the convention's role in the overall process of electing the president.

The Republican Party also was discussed in conjunction with different minority groups and the issue of diversity. For example, 25 percent of the articles discussed African Americans, 11 percent discussed Hispanics, 7 percent discussed Jewish Americans, and 5 percent discussed racial minorities and diversity in general. In addition, 11 percent of the articles discussed women and 4 percent discussed the poor. Most of the articles in the *New York Times* connecting the GOP to race speculated about presidential cabinet appointments:

Mr. Bush, they said, would also like his cabinet to include at least one Hispanic, blacks and women—a desire heightened by the closeness of the election, the need to unite a divided country and

his sustained campaign pledge to put a new face on the Republican Party. (Bruni 2000, A27)

Other *New York Times* articles discussed the historical relationship between African Americans and the Republican Party and whether Latino voters would become a part of the party's electoral base.

In contrast, several articles in the *New York Amsterdam News* focused on the role of black and Hispanic voters in other races, such as the New York senatorial race. One example reported,

All is not now sweetness and light in the state Republican Party. It has been virtually destroyed by a one-woman tidal wave, by the name of Hillary Clinton, who came into New York as a stranger, listened on a tour, did her homework, visited, learned and finally wound up in the Black church and in the Black community—for she found out that this was where she was most comfortable and could be herself. (Tatum 2000b, 1)

A number of articles also analyzed the electoral fate of black Republican candidates in 2000.

I then examined the juxtaposition of race against the discussion of the Florida recount. These analyses sought to discern whether the media's coverage of the dispute over the election was framed in a way in which citizens could connect it to the racial symbolism of the Republican Party. Of the articles discussing the Florida recount, 20 percent discussed African Americans. Another 20 percent included a discussion of diversity and racial minorities. Regardless of source, these articles were not particularly flattering, as in this example from the *New York Amsterdam News*.

But we begin the millennium in America, which is, by the way, a very young country, not knowing who the next president of the United States will be. We do know that Al Gore won. What we are not certain of at this point is how the Bush forces, including father George, brother Jeb, George W., the CIA and the Republican Party and the wealthiest white men in America, will try to convince Black people that the election for president that is being stolen in Florida is not really a theft at all. It is merely, to their way of thinking, a more honest way to decide who the president of the United States is or should be, based upon a whole system of rationaliza-

tion, lies, deceit and more duplicity than can be named. (Tatam 2000a, A51)

Several articles referred to members of the Republican Party as crooks and criminals who had stolen the election. Moreover, the articles discussed the disenfranchisement of black and Latino voters.

Finally, 6 percent of the media coverage mentioned the Republican convention in conjunction with the Florida recount. According to a November 2000 *New York Times* article,

During the G.O.P. convention in Philadelphia we were treated to the view of a Republican Party that had become less white, less elitist, more multiracial, led by a Texas governor who promised to be a uniter, not a divider, and who would distance himself from the mean-spiritedness of the Newt Gingrich/Tom DeLay era.

During the post-election, however, we have seen a Republican Party dominated by elderly elite white men and women, who will delegitimize any court, any judge and any ruling that stands in the way of Mr. Bush's presumed right to govern. The Bush aides will question the patriotism of anyone who raises doubts about confusing military ballots, but they evince no concern for blacks, Jews and Hispanics who wrongly voted for Pat Buchanan, or no one, because of their confusing ballots. So much for the Spirit of Philadelphia. (Friedman 2000, A29)

These findings suggest that the Republican Party's image in the media was connected to the Florida recount. Moreover, this discussion was linked in many instances to race, directly conflicting with the image of compassionate conservatism the party had painted in the preceding months. The media's postelection coverage of the party may have aided in undoing the improvement in perceptions that the Republican Party had enjoyed in the postconvention period.

The Public, the Republican Party, and the 2000 Election

The previous section discussed the media's perception of the Republican Party in the postelection period. But how did the American electorate perceive the Republican Party during this time?

Chapter 3 showed that people perceive parties to have distinct reputations for the ability to represent different constituencies. With respect to which party was better for different groups in society in

2002, individuals recognized similar relationships. (See the appendix for the exact questions respondents were asked.) Table 9 indicates that people believed that the Democratic Party was best for blacks. Specifically, 42 percent of respondents indicated that the Democrats were better for African Americans, while only 5 percent believed that the Republican Party was better and 53.2 percent believed that no differences existed. When it came to which party was better for white Americans, the Republican Party had the advantage, but not overwhelmingly so: 21.9 percent of respondents believed that the Republican Party was better for whites, while 5.3 percent indicated that the Democratic Party was better; however, 73 percent saw no difference between the two parties.

Differences also existed along gender lines. The Republican Party was perceived to be better than the Democratic Party for men. While the vast majority of respondents saw no difference between the two parties with respect to men, 21 percent indicated that the Republican Party was better, compared to 6 percent who indicated that the Democratic Party was better. In contrast, about 29 percent of respondents thought the Democratic Party was better for women, while less than 7 percent believed the Republican Party was better for women and nearly two-thirds saw no difference between the two parties.

Finally, respondents thought that the Democratic Party was better for the poor and that the Republican Party was better for the rich. Specifically, just over half of the respondents indicated that the Democratic Party was better for poor people, while 8.7 percent chose the Republican Party and 39 percent saw little difference between the two parties. In contrast, 56.8 percent of respondents believed that the GOP better served the interests of the rich, 37.7 percent saw no difference between the parties, and only 5.5 percent thought that the Democratic Party was better.

TABLE 9. Perceptions of Which Party Is Better for Different Groups in Society (in percentages)

	Blacks	Whites	Women	Men	Poor	Rich
Democrats	41.8	5.3	28.7	6.2	52.7	5.5
Republicans	5.0	21.9	6.8	20.9	8.7	56.8
Not much difference between them	53.2	72.8	64.5	73.0	38.6	37.7

Source: 2002 American National Election Study.

The 2002 American National Election Study asked, “All things considered, would you say that the 2000 presidential election was decided in a way that was fair or unfair?”² Table 10 presents the distribution of responses. In general, 60 percent believed that the 2000 election was decided in a fair manner. Approval of the election, however, varied by race and partisanship. Whereas 66 percent of whites believed that the election was decided fairly, only 21 percent of blacks agreed. Republicans were also more likely than Democrats and independents to approve of the way the 2000 election was decided. Specifically, 30 percent of Democrats, 61 percent of independents, and 92 percent of Republicans approved of the election.

How did the perceived fairness of the 2000 election relate to the GOP’s party image? In the aftermath of the election, responses to this question were significantly correlated to the Republican Party’s image along a number of dimensions. In particular, perceptions of which party better represented the interests of different groups in society were moderated by the election’s perceived fairness. Evaluations of the Republican Party, however, were affected only when they called into question the effectiveness of the GOP’s representation of minority groups. For example, figure 15 examines differences in evaluations of the two parties’ racial symbolism—that is, which party was best for blacks, based on attitudes toward the 2000 elections.³ The y-axis represents a scale from 1 to 0 where 1 means that the Democratic Party does a better job representing a particular group and 0 means the Republican Party is best for that group. A value of .5 means that no difference exists between the two. Among whites, no difference existed between those who believed the 2000 election was fair and those who did not—evaluations ranged from .43 to .45, with the Republican Party having a slight advantage over the Democratic Party in representing whites. Regardless of perceptions of the 2000 election, respondents believed that the Democratic Party better represented African Americans. Those who believed that the election was unfair, however, indicated that the Democratic Party was 16 percentage points better at representing blacks than those who believed the election was fair. Evaluations moved from .61 to .77 as perceptions of the election became more negative, a statistically significant difference.

2. See the appendix for information on how this variable was coded.

3. The predicted values used in this figure were calculated using the results presented in table A9. Female was held at its mode, and all other variables were held at their means.

TABLE 10. The 2000 Election Was Decided in a Way That Was Fair (in percentages)

	All	Blacks	Whites	Men	Women	Democrats	Republicans	Independents
Approve strongly	41.3	12.0	45.0	43.4	39.7	14.8	72.7	37.2
Approve not strongly	19.0	9.0	20.8	19.8	18.4	15.6	19.7	23.9
Disapprove not strongly	7.6	10.0	7.2	6.5	8.5	10.6	1.4	9.1
Disapprove strongly	32.0	69.0	27.0	30.3	33.3	59.1	6.3	29.8

Source: 2002 American National Election Study.

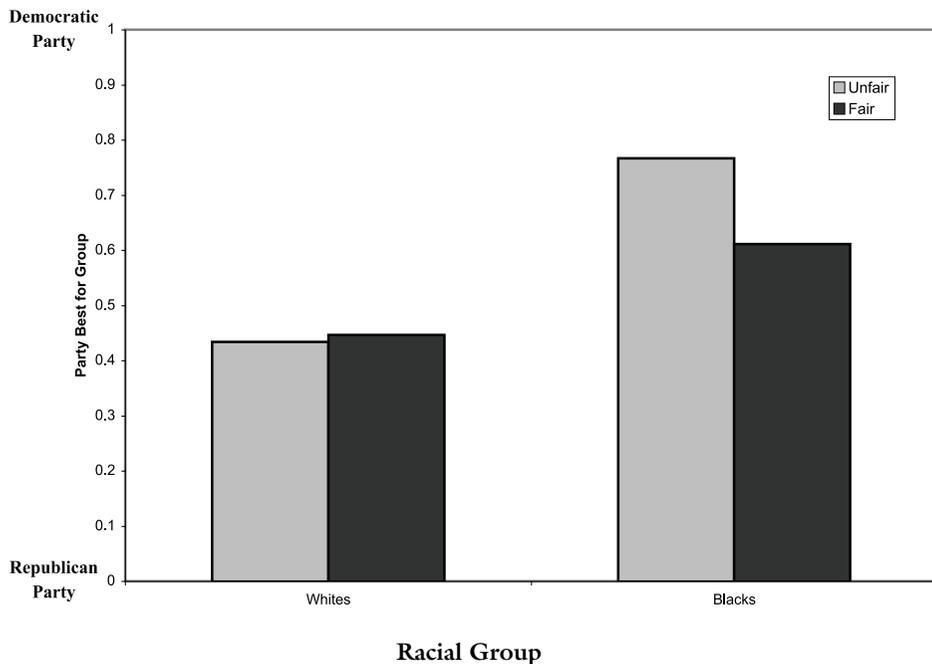


Fig. 15. Impressions of the Republican Party's image on race based on perceived fairness of the 2000 election. (Data from 2002 American National Election Study.)

The same pattern emerges with respect to other minority groups. As figure 16 illustrates, respondents overwhelmingly believed that the Republican Party does a better job of representing the interests of the rich.⁴ Although a modest difference existed between respondents who believed that the election was fair and those who did not, this difference was not statistically significant. In contrast, respondents perceived the Democratic Party as better representing the poor. Those who believed the election was unfair, however, gave the Democratic Party a larger advantage—on average, a statistically significant 9 percentage point difference.

Respondents believed that the Republican Party better represented men and that the Democratic Party better represented women. When asked to evaluate the parties' ability to represent men, respondents

4. The calculated predicted values for this figure were derived from the regression analysis results presented in table A10. Again, these estimates were calculated by holding the variable for gender at its mode and all other variables at their means.

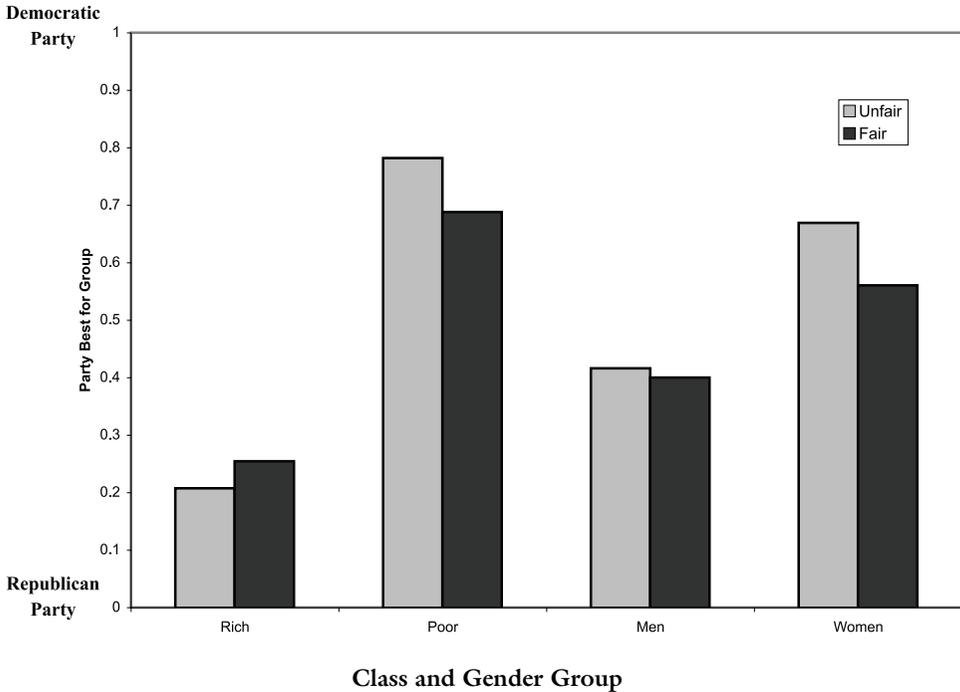


Fig. 16. Impressions of the Republican Party's image on gender and class based on perceived fairness of the 2000 election. (Data from 2002 American National Election Study.)

gave the Republican Party about a 10 percentage point advantage, regardless of perceptions of the 2000 election. With regard to the representation of women, however, a statistically significant 11 percentage point difference existed between those who believed that the election was fair and those who did not.

Perceptions of the 2000 election also mattered when it came to evaluations of George W. Bush. Figure 17 presents the results.⁵ This time, the y-axis represents average feeling thermometer scores. Higher scores indicate warmer feelings toward Bush. On average, those with negative perceptions of the 2000 election gave Bush a feeling thermometer score of 56, just higher than neutral. Among those with more positive perceptions of the election, Bush's feeling thermometer score increased to 76. This 20-degree difference is statistically significant.

5. The predicted values used in this figure were calculated using the results presented in table A11. Female was held at its mode, and all other variables were held at their means.

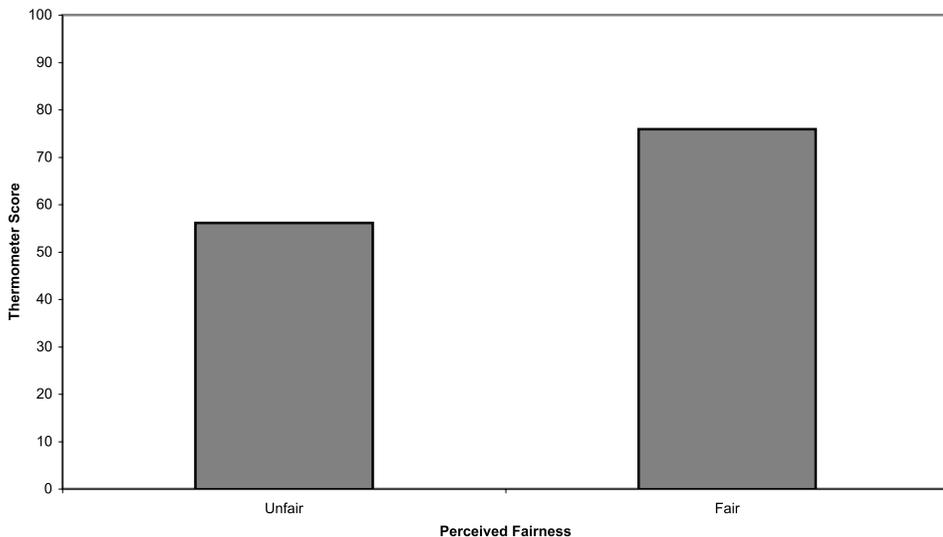


Fig. 17. George W. Bush feeling thermometer based on perceived fairness of the 2000 election. (Data from 2002 American National Election Study.)

Conclusion

Scholars have only just begun to gauge the impact of the 2000 election. Studies have already found that the election did not undermine “the overall level of expressed public confidence in either the presidency or the [U.S. Supreme] Court” (Price and Romantan 2004, 952). Nevertheless, I find that the perceived fairness of the 2000 election factored into the calculus of citizens’ evaluations of the parties. The events surrounding the 2000 election remained salient in voters’ minds two years later. The perceived fairness of the election affected beliefs regarding the Republican Party’s ability to adequately represent minority groups as well as positive or negative feelings toward Bush. The perceived fairness of the election did not correlate with all assessments of the parties. This was not just a matter of people making general partisan evaluations. Citizens linked the election to particular (relevant) aspects of the parties’ images.

The results presented in this chapter also confirm that the process of

shaping and reshaping party images is an uphill battle. Elites face constant opposition from their competitors, from the media, and from everyday politics. At times, elites face opposition—not all of it intentional—from within their party ranks. Nevertheless, reshaping party images is an iterative process that sometimes requires elites to take one step forward and two steps back.