Some thoughts on the election for Sociology 125, Contemporary American Society

I thought it would be worthwhile to give you my sociological reflections on the outcome of this election in light of some of the themes of our earlier discussion of American Democracy and how it works.

One way to talk about the election is in terms of the details of the tactics of various key actors. For example, Karl Rove – the architect of the Bush election campaign – as argued that the best way to win in an election is to discredit an opponent’s strengths, not attack his weaknesses. What might one think were Kerry’s political strengths? Two come to mind: 1. his personal heroism in the Vietnam War, and 2. His intellectual seriousness in grappling with the complexity of policy problems, which means a willingness to change his mind in light of new evidence, circumstances and arguments and a general unwillingness to adopt simplistic solutions. Many people would regard these as strengths. These need to be turned into weaknesses. The first involved ads that stated that Kerry had exaggerated his war record. It didn’t matter that all but one of the soldiers that served under his command stated that these ads were outright lies; all that was important that enough doubt be infused into the image that it would no longer carry the weight it might otherwise have had. The second was turned into the famous flip-flop accusation. Instead of consistency being defined in terms of the underlying principles on which one bases a decision, consistency was defined in terms of never changing support for specific policies. Whatever one thinks of the ethics of such strategies, they appear to be at least somewhat effective.

I don’t think, however, that the most important sociological lessons are about the clever tactics of campaign propaganda. Rather, I would like to share some thoughts about aspects of the election that intersect some of the sociological ideas we explored earlier in the course. The first has to do with the relationship between civil society and political conflict in America today, and the second has to do with some implications of the increasingly salient role of conservative religion in politics.

1. Organization, mobilization, and civil society

Recall a theme from our discussion of democratic politics and how it works: active participation of citizens in politics is heavily shaped by their connection to associations of various sorts in civil society. Isolated individuals, living their private lives and pursuing their private goals and ambitions are unlikely to be effectively engaged and mobilized politically. The character of political participation depends on the existence of active intermediaries, associations, that are connected to citizens’ everyday lives in some way and create a context for this sense of community and solidarity that is critical for democratic activism.

Now, what does this election have to do with this? I would say the following: In the period from the 1930s to the 1970s the most important association of this sort in the U.S. was unions. At its peak, 35% of the adult population were members of unions, and a higher percentage worked in work settings with active unions. Unions provided a strong
associational basis for such popular mobilization for political participation. Since the 1970s unions have precipitously declined, and while they still provided an important associational basis for voter mobilization, even in the 2004 election, this was nothing like the capacity for such mobilization in years past. The Democratic Party, however, was helped by something quite new, a decisively new associational basis of mobilization represented especially by the organization Moveon.org and certain affiliated associations – Americans Coming Together, for example. These new associations worked through the internet to create a vibrant, activated network of groups that facilitated individual involvement, massive voter registration drives and grass roots involvement. The result was a very considerable new voter mobilization on the Democratic side.

If this had been the only major mobilization, then Kerry would have won in Ohio and Florida. But there was an additional process of voter mobilization linked to civil society that also was intensively active in this election cycle and which, to a significant effect resulted in a counter-mobilization of social forces behind Bush: mobilization linked to Evangelical Christian Churches. Historically in the U.S. Churches, especially conservative Christian churches, have played a relatively peripheral role in direct political activity. Of course they were always important in a more diffuse way, since religion affects people’s values and ideals and these in turn shape political choices. And, in the Civil Rights era of the 1960s, it was certainly true that black churches played an absolutely central role in the grass roots mobilization and struggles for civil rights. But still, in general Churches did not function as grassroots associations for electoral mobilization. That has changed. This appears to be what was decisive organizationally in Ohio and Florida – although, of course, we will have to wait for more analysis to be sure of this. A network of conservative Christian Churches played a crucial role in increasing voter turnout and mobilizing grassroots energies, which effectively neutralized the very large new voter registration drives in urban centers, especially among poor and minority voters. Conservative Christian Churches, as organizations, self-consciously organized information campaigns and registration and get out the vote campaigns among church members.

In a way, perhaps, it is surprising that this mobilization role as an association of civil society has not been a regular feature of American politics. After all, Churches are a kind of natural association for politics. People meet there in face-to-face interactions on a regular basis. They share beliefs and styles of communication. They engage in all sorts of social activities that build a sense of solidarity and shared fates. But it has also been the case that traditionally many people believed that churches as organizations should stay out of secular politics, should not become secular organizations engaged in mobilization for state power. That seems to have changed. In some ways this is may be good for democracy, since as I suggested democracy, to be vibrant, depends on such associational connections for people. But this specific form of associational mobilization also poses some new problems and challenges for democracy.
2. The problem of religiously based “moral values” in politics

One of the problems posed by the new intensified involvement of conservative churches in politics centers on the nature of debate, consensus formation and compromise that is normally part of democratic politics. I have put on my website what I feel is a very good Op-Ed piece by Gary Wills who discusses this issue.

Consider the character of political debate over traditional economic issues: how high taxes should be and who should pay how much? how much spending there should be for public education, public health and national parks? How stringently should the government regulate pollution? and so on. For each of these there is a spectrum of different positions one can take, and when there is debate, it is easy to see how compromises are formed, how differences can be split down the middle. It is also easy to see how, in general, on these kinds of issues, calm debate in which arguments and evidence are presented can change people’s minds. If we disagree on the problem of regulation of pollution, data can be gathered about the effects of different policies which opposing parties all recognize as relevant data, we can examine how regulation works in other countries, we can look at the trade-offs between protection of the environment and jobs, and have some chance of either reaching a consensus on the best policy, or at least agreeing to split the difference in the form of a compromise.

Now let’s look at an issue like Same-Sex Marriage and its role as a mobilizing device in politics: some people believe that God has unequivocally decreed that homosexuality is a sin and an abomination, that it is utterly immoral, and that allowing same-sex marriage would be an affront to God and would intrinsically constitute an assault on the family; others believe homosexuality is simply a distinct form of sexual orientation and bodily pleasure that has no inherent moral salience at all, and that the public recognition of loving adult relations is an affirmation of the value of family. On such issues it is much harder to sit down and have a calm debate and provide evidence for and against different positions that all parties will acknowledge as legitimate evidence. This is crucial: on the homosexuality debate, for example, a secular person does not regard passages from the Bible as relevant “evidence” for deciding public policy. And a Conservative Christian would not regard as relevant evidence, the sociological research that shows that children raised in stable same-sex families are as likely to be well-adjusted as children raised by one man and one woman. Consensus formation and compromise become much tougher to achieve in this circumstance. What is more, if one feels deeply committed in an absolute way to these sorts of moral-religious positions, then it is hard to balance them against the more flexible economic issues such as taxes, jobs, environmental protection, and so. There is, in my view, no natural or Biblical reason why these conservative Christian positions around moral issues such as same-sex marriage and abortion, should be linked to opposition to universal health insurance or anti-poverty programs or vigorous protection of the environment. Indeed, it could be argued, that traditional Christian values of compassion for the poor and human stewardship of the Earth would support quite liberal positions on these issues. What has happened is that Conservative political forces have managed to forge a strong policy-package in which conservative moral-values policies are artificially linked to right-wing social and economic policies. The result is
that many of the people who vote for the politicians who back this package are, in very significant ways, harmed by the resulting policies once they are enacted.

Here is where the specific form of mobilization of citizens into electoral politics through socially conservative Evangelical Churches, I think, has important longer-term implications in the US. In the exit polls from the election, people were asked what was the most important issue in influencing their vote. Nationally, “moral issues” ranked number one. This was a code-word, I think, for issues like Gay marriage and abortion, not the moral issue of invading other countries without being threatened by them or the moral issue of having millions of children living in poverty and without health care. Voters who said that moral issues were the most important voted overwhelming for Bush. Voters who said that the economy or the War in Iraq were the most important, voted for Kerry. This mobilization of voters around these specific “moral issues” was aided by the decision to place on the ballot in crucial swing states constitutional “defense of marriage” amendments prohibiting same-sex marriage. While in fact most Americans, accordingly to opinion polls, take rather moderate positions on these moral questions, the most effective associations that mobilize around them in civil society do not, and this is what has the biggest impact on the political agenda.

What we have, then, is a welding together in American politics a potent, associational network in Civil Society for voter mobilization along with an intensely ideologically-driven set of political positions, at the core of which is an unwillingness to seek consensus and compromise. While I do feel that an active engaged civil society is essential for a vibrant democracy, this particular form of such engagement may, in the end, undermine some of the basic norms of tolerance and compromise that are at the core of democratic politics.