

# Campaign 2000's Real Civics Lesson

**How this race busts the four greatest election myths.**

By Jesse Walker

**S**pin doctors concoct myths for a living, and in the eternal wrangling since Election Day—is it too early to start calling this the Post-Election Era?—they've been working overtime. Literally. But before we digest their latest lulus on everything from Florida election law to the statesmanlike virtues of Richard Nixon (who ever thought we'd hear pundits urg-

deceit in the counting rooms. It's that the tally was so tight that it was worth a campaign's time to point those problems out. Close up, the making of lawmakers turns out to be as ugly as the making of laws.

## 2. The myth of your precious vote.

Voting is, we're told, our highest civic duty. But piety aside, the chances of one

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ing Al Gore to be even more like Tricky Dick?), we should pause to take stock of four great political myths that in a just world would now be busted once and for all.

## 1. The myth of the pristine election.

Of all the flotsam to emerge from Florida's electoral chaos, surely the most interesting was the matter-of-fact assertion, made by liberal and conservative commentators alike, that the Sunshine State is infamous for electoral incompetence and fraud. Meanwhile, the Republicans argued that if we have a recount in Florida, we might as well have one in virtually every closely contested state, since "irregularities" were reported all over the country. The most stunning thing about this argument was that it's true.

In other words: What's remarkable about this election wasn't the errors and

ballot actually making a difference in a national election are ridiculously small. At first glance, this race may look like the exception: For once, we had a presidential contest so close that a handful of votes could have swung it from one candidate to another. "This," countless pundits assured us, "proves that your vote really does matter."

It does nothing of the kind, even if you happen to live in one of the few Florida counties where the claim might ring true. If an election really came down to your one ballot, it now appears that the results will be challenged in court—assuming, that is, that your vote wasn't already miscounted, misplaced, or spoiled. You might as well have stayed home or written in your dog: It would've had as much effect on the outcome as voting for Bush, voting for Gore, or putting a bullet in your head the night before.

## 3. The myth of political science.

Almost everyone's upset—and should be—at the exit-pollsters for getting so much wrong on election night. But what about those alleged experts who called the election wrong long before anyone cast a vote?

When political scientists "modeled" this contest, they said Gore would win in a cakewalk: The incumbent party, they explained, always wins in times of peace and prosperity. Whoops. If the Federal Trade Commission really cared about truth in labeling, it would force the nation's political science departments to strip the word "science" from their names.

## 4. The myth of the divided country.

This year, the Democrats nominated a centrist who, but for a tiny handful of positions, might as well be a Republican. The Republicans nominated a centrist who, but for a tiny handful of positions, might as well be a Democrat. Both failed to inspire much passion, except the negative kind. And both aimed their campaigns at moderate swing voters. (Gore made some occasional and entirely unconvincing rhetorical forays into populism, but those weren't an expression of his larger strategy; they were an effort to swat the Nader challenge.)

So it's scarcely surprising that the country's vote split down the middle. What's surprising is that so many observers have taken this to mean that—to quote David Broder—"It was as if two different nations went to vote yesterday." Please. There are deeper divisions between Jay Leno and David Letterman than there are between Bush and Gore. This country has plenty of rifts, but it has been years since we've had a presidential election that managed to ignore as many of them as this one did.

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