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# Why Bush won re-el

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While travelling in the Middle East, I'm hearing from Arab friends who are still deeply troubled over the outcome of the US elections. "How could the American people reelect this man who has failed so badly and has betrayed American values?" was one of the more benign questions they asked me.

The question, of course, was referring to the unfinished fragile situation in Afghanistan, the unravelling

mess in Iraq, the long neglected Palestinian crisis, and the reports of civil liberties problems in the US.

From the outside looking in at America, one might assume that in reelecting President George Bush, American voters, fully aware of these situations, approved of those policies and decided to give the president a mandate to continue them for four more years. This, quite simply, was not the case.

It is important to note that many American voters, while concerned with the war and foreign policy in general, do not follow the news in any detail. And despite these concerns, they are not the worries that keep Americans up at night. Not Iraq, but, "will we have enough money to send Johnny to college next year" or, "do I trust Susie's new boyfriend" or, "will I be able to keep my job?"

The lead story on most local television news stations

and in most local newspapers is the car accident on Route 11, the fire on Main Street and topics like underage drinking.

In this setting, the Republican campaign was able to effectively manage information and perceptions about the more troublesome issues the president might have had to face in this election. Iraq and Afghanistan were presented as "freedom on the march", with violence the result of thugs and terror-

ists who are enemies of liberty. Bush was portrayed, as a strong wartime president whose resolve and strength would see us through this period of uncertainty, while John Kerry was portrayed as too indecisive and weak to provide the leadership the world needs.

And despite coming from rather similar backgrounds - both were born in the north-east of wealthy parents and

educated at Yale - Bush was transformed into a regular guy, while Kerry was portrayed as an elitist who could not understand the needs of average Americans.

For me, one of the more compelling images to emerge from this year's presidential contest was a rather simple event that explains a lot.

It was Bush, shirtsleeves rolled, arms holding the sides of the podium, leaning towards the crowd below and

saying in that "down home" Texan accent he learned to use: "I ask you for your vote" or, "I'd really appreciate your vote."

While pundits continue to debate the importance of big issues or values in the outcome of the election, it would be a mistake to discount the powerful impact of the simple gesture of the president of the United States asking average voters for their support. That

line never made the evening news, but repeated day in and day out at rallies across the country, it allowed Bush to connect with voters in a way no policy speech could. It established a bond and created comfort.

As many voters indicated in interviews and polls, Bush was the guy they'd invite to a backyard barbecue, or the guy with whom they'd have a beer. He was, they felt, "a guy like me" and, by implication, "a

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guy who understands me and what I care about".

A rule of thumb in politics is that when Democrats lose the "he's the guy like me" voters, they can't win, because this group of middle-class working families is part of the Democrats' core vote.

So how did Bush, whose actual policies did not serve the interests of this constituency, win their support? He asked for it and Kerry did not.

Kerry should have known better. The importance of ask-

ing was, after all, one of the lessons taught by the legendary speaker of the House of Representatives "Tip" O'Neill, from Kerry's home state of Massachusetts. To make his point, O'Neill would tell the story of his shock at learning that his long-time next-door neighbour didn't vote for him. When he asked her why, she replied: "Because you never asked me." As he would elaborate, this act of asking forms a bond between

the candidate and his constituents. It says, "I'm not above you. I need you."

Now, I'm not saying that issues didn't matter, or that insecurity resulting from terrorism or concerns about changing mores weren't real concerns to some voters. But at the end of the day, with many voters, neither issues nor interests mattered as much as trust and comfort. They voted for the guy who "seemed" more like them, for the guy who asked for their vote.

It sounds simple and it is. So don't read too much into this election. Post-election polls show that Americans still disapprove of the war, want the US to pursue a more balanced foreign policy and aren't happy with the president's handling of foreign affairs and the economy. But they liked Bush more than Kerry and that's all it took to win not a mandate, but 51 per cent of the vote.