

What's the reaction to Bush?

We asked four American philosophers what the reaction had been in their departments to the re-election of George W Bush.

Philosophy has been long known for the consolation it offers, and for its ingenious variety of interpretations of the simplest of facts. Uniformly disappointed by Bush's victory, my philosophical colleagues were quick to find solace in very different things they thought that victory had shown or augured for the future. While my more arrogant associates took comfort from the thought that their intelligence was proven superior to the majority of Americans (who voted for Bush) and that government by a philosopher-king would clearly be better than a media-and-money driven democracy, others found future-looking hope in the fact that younger voters voted for change. Many were hopeful that moral values emerged as a surprisingly key election issue, perhaps promising a boom in ethical theory, though some feared the fervor for moral values was really the expression of religious sentiments that most of my ardently secular philosophical colleagues would be horrified to entertain.

Richard Shusterman, Temple University, Philadelphia

My department consists of radical leftists, Democrats, and an anarchist. We feel disappointment that Bush won and resignation that so many Americans are mean-

spirited, naive, or stupid. The resignation we feel is a sort of "learned helplessness", fuelled by the direction we see the country moving since the "Reagan Revolution" of 1980, politically, socially, and (anti-) intellectually. Although we recognise progress on some social fronts, and believe our universities, collectively, are the world's best, we believe the political demise corresponds to a demise in the nation at large.

Vices that used to embarrass politicians have morphed into virtues we demand of presidents and admire in ourselves: the traits of intrusive religiosity, bullying, dogmatism, demagoguery, and the glorification of selfishness. Living in Republican rural Western Pennsylvania reminds us of how many of our neighbours loved these qualities in Bush. We are horrified by this thought: If the Democrats could not beat this Republican in these times, whom can they beat?

Richard Double, Edinboro University of Pennsylvania

The most prevalent response has been a feeling of despair. After Gore lost in 2000, many of us thought the problem was that a divided Left didn't wholeheartedly get behind Gore. But this time, we were so united in support of Kerry – many of us volunteered for the campaign, donated money, attended protests – and even so, Kerry ended up losing. In the wake of this defeat, my colleague Dan Moller suggests that we need to rethink

our approach to the political struggle. Perhaps the problem is not just that a small cadre of elites has somehow managed to frustrate the will of the people. Perhaps the problem is that the majority of the people simply do not share our ideals.

Joshua Knohe, Princeton University

The first person I saw at the office on 3 November had been crying. Her daughter had come from school the day before the election asking whether it was true that John Kerry was a baby killer. So, she ended up having to talk about abortion with an eight year old. I guess this is what Bushites would call a victory: bringing values back into the home. Most people at the university are in despair. There is anger that the Democrats ran another bad campaign; deep puzzlement at the fact that so many Americans blithely ignored the Bush administration's lies; and, among some, a vicious the-gloves-are-coming-off attitude about religion. Many people I spoke to are palpably aware that they are now a relatively powerless minority, condemned to live with the consequences of decisions made by people motivated by fear of terrorism that is statistically quite unlikely directly to impact them and who have a visceral distrust of reflection. Everyone is very worried about the Supreme Court. The United States is becoming a meaner and nastier place.

Susan Dwyer, University of Maryland, Baltimore County