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■ In my opinion

PLAYING ON Morality

John Zogby is a man who likes to be on top of things. Zogby, who has nurtured his public opinion business into one of the pre-eminent polling organizations in the world, has made a living making sure neither he nor his wide variety of clients are caught with their pants down.

Pollsters make a point of being right — at least within the confidence interval — but like all practitioners of an imperfect science, they can be wrong. And this year, many were, Zogby included. As late as election day, he predicted a win for Democratic presidential candidate John Kerry, The Observer-Dispatch (Utica, N.Y.) reported. The guess, though wrong, wasn't a bad one. A shift of a percentage point or two in Ohio, or any of dozens of other plausible electoral scenarios would have vindicated him. And by the afternoon of Nov. 2, many, this columnist included, thought that the office was more likely Kerry's than not. (The problems with the exit polls on which I and others based our guesses are interesting, but outside the scope of this column.)

Wrong guesses are the opinion pollsters' eternal burden. The public and the media alike place faith in their numbers, but they have only the raw sampling of a fickle populace to guide their estimations.

But something stranger happened to the opinions survey around the election.

"When we did our polling before the election and asked people the five most important issues on their minds, moral values just never came up," Zogby explained to the San Francisco Chronicle. "I'm baffled. It was obviously extremely important as a driver."

Moral values did come up, as



TRAVIS WILSE
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pundits have praised or lamented. According to an Edison Media Research/Mitofsky International exit poll, a plurality (22 percent) of voters listed "moral values" as the most important criterion for choosing a president, followed by the economy (20), terrorism (19) and Iraq (15). But saying that moral values were critical to this election, and leaving it at that, obfuscates a subtler political landscape than the notion that a dramatic electoral re-engagement of conservative, evangelical Christian voters decisively (and maybe single-handedly) derailed a Kerry victory. Moral issues, whatever they may be, are important for voters across a spectrum of categories.

Gallup Editor in Chief Frank Newport observed in the same Chronicle article, "It's not some particular group or people who are members of an organization. It seems to be much broader."

Muddling analysis of the issue is the oversimplified and mostly wrong notion that gay marriage ballot measures (a moral issue for some) spurred turnout for President Bush. In the 11 states where such initiatives were on the ballot (all of them passed), Bush did improve his share of the popular vote by 2.26 percentage points over his 2000 election figures (from 52.2 percent to 54.4 percent). But his national share notched up 3.22 percentage points

(47.9 percent to 51.1 percent). Bush's percentage point gains, it turns out, were actually 42.4 percent smaller in states with the amendments on the ballots. (Raw numbers were taken from uncertified CNN 2004 election results and the Federal Election Commission.) While one could arguably chalk up a small part of this gap to greater pre-existing saturation of Republican support in the states (nine of which were red in both election years), the presence of the measures certainly didn't help him.

But the worst and most harmful oversimplification is that of characterizing "moral values" as anything too specific (say, as code for the religious inclinations of socially conservative evangelical Protestants). A well-considered letter to the editor that graced this page recently ("Moral values" differ greatly," Nov. 9) elucidated this point: "Moral values" is the big post-election buzzword but it is meaningless ... Americans simply have no unified definition of what constitutes the moral position."

This sort of sanity, however, will likely and regrettably sink into a cacophony of reductionism perpetuated by parties who stand to lose from a fuller discussion of the point. Whatever the case, Democratic strategists could stand to pay attention to at least one point: The 22 percent of voters who cited moral values as their top electoral concern turned out for Bush over Kerry by a margin of 80-18. While this says little about the Democratic Party's position on moral issues, it's clear it can make up some ground by clarifying and refocusing its message.

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■ Editorial

Get in line, it is time for quacks and smacks

Quacks to Seoul, South Korea's, Hanyang University for their generous gift of \$500,000 and Quacks to alumnus Dave Petrone for his generous gift of \$2.5 million to the University. We now feel sorta guilty about planning to skip out on our student loans. Sorta.

Smacks to the Career Fair organizers for serving up another long buffet of tacky corporate lacky positions. We know the job market isn't great but this is ridiculous. Fifth-year senior is sounding pretty good.

Smacks to anyone who won't let the election die already. Analysis in the name of political science is one thing, but come on! The campaign is over, stop the spinning.

Quacks to the delightfully amusing ramblings of conspiracy theorists who warrant an exception to the above Smack. In their honor ...

Smacks to the Illuminati for wiring Bush during the debates and Smacks to Nick Cage for making us afraid to park our cars at the Mason's lodge during football games at Autzen.

Quacks to the resignation of Attorney General John Ashcroft — not that we didn't love his big-brotheresque policies, heavy-handed destruction of states' rights and civil liberties, crazy fundamentalist beliefs (dancing is a sin?) and nail-biting terror warnings, but we're happy to see him go.

Quacks to California voters for green-lighting embryonic stem cell research to the tune of \$3 billion.

Smacks to California voters for rejecting a ballot measure that would have reformed their state's uniquely harsh Three Strikes law. In general, basing criminal law on a random sports rule seems like a bad idea, even when it is America's pastime. But when shoplifting a candy bar can land people in prison for the rest of their lives, something needs to change.

Smacks to the Smart Truck, a new consumer tank currently under development that would be more massive than the Hummer. You heard us: three inches higher, four feet longer, 3,000 pounds heavier and even less fuel efficient. It's the perfect small penis mobile for guys who like haulin' shit and showing wilderness areas who's the boss — just remember to stay within one mile of a gas station at all times.

Smacks to the man who brought a handgun into a San Francisco school and threatened students and teachers in order to rob two employees. Schools are intended to be safe havens for our children, and let's keep them that way.

Quacks to the pilot sex education program approved in Maryland that discusses homosexuality and uses a video that shows 10th graders how to put on a condom. Let's teach children at an early age how to be safe.

Quacks to "Law & Order" for taking on "tough guy" actor Dennis Farina as a new character. With his steel-gray hair and craggy face, how could you not love this ex-cop? What is that you say? Who is this guy? We agree.

Smacks to holiday decorations hitting shelves two months before Christmas and New Years. Heck, why not start hauling out the tree in July?

Quacks to President Bush for nominating White House counsel Alberto Gonzales to fill John Ashcroft's attorney general post. Gonzales is a moderate, and he would be the first Hispanic attorney general.

Quacks to veterans. 'Nuff said.

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