

The 2002 Election Aiken County Exit Poll: A Descriptive Analysis

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All conclusions in this report are solely those of the author
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Introduction

Students in Dr. Robert E. Botsch's Political Science Research Method's class have completed analysis of their exit poll of Aiken County voters in the November 5, 2002 general election. Comparing the results of the sample of 640 voters to countywide results showed that the sample was an accurate representation of the county. In the county Sanford actually won 65% of the vote while the sample of voters gave him 63%. In the county Graham actually won 67% of the vote, while the sample of voters gave him 66% of the vote.

Methodology

The survey included voters chosen systematically from ten precincts that represent all areas of the county and that have in the past reflected the county-wide vote. Voters were sampled during two time periods, first starting at 7:30 am and then again at 11:30. The response rate was 73%, meaning that nearly three of every four voters approached by students completed the survey. The sampling error for questions answered by all respondents is + or - 4%. Questions should be directed to Robert E. Botsch, Professor of Political Science at USCA.

Partisanship and Turnout

Election results in Aiken County turned more on partisanship and turnout than issues. All Republican candidates carried the county by hefty majorities. Even unknown and under-funded Republican State Superintendent of Education candidate Dan Hiltgen carried the county with 51% of the vote.

The composition of the electorate was strongly GOP. In this year's election, 57% identified themselves as Republican compared to 52% in the last non-Presidential election in 1998. Democratic self-identifiers remained about constant, falling from 32% in 1998 to 31% in 2002.

Not only were Democrats badly outnumbered, they were also less loyal to the candidates of their party. While Republican identifiers voted with their party's candidates near the top of the ticket more than 90% of the time, Democratic identifiers averaged voting for their candidates in the 80-85% range.

Issues and the Sanford Vote

On a variety of issues the electorate was at best marginally supportive of the issue positions taken by Republican candidates. A centerpiece of Republican Mark Sanford's campaign was restructuring state government so that the governor would appoint a number of constitutional officers rather than have them

separately elected, as is currently the case. Nearly 80% of the voters rejected that idea. Only 12% supported it, with the rest undecided.

Republican Sanford also campaigned on a tax proposal that would increase the gasoline tax by five cents a gallon while gradually eliminating the state income tax over an 18-year period. Voters rejected that idea by a margin of 52% to 35% with 13% undecided.

A plurality of voters agreed with Mark Sanford on the issue of mandating local school boards to allow parents to transfer their children to schools across district lines. Voters sided with the Governor-elect by a margin of 49% to 25% with the remaining 25% undecided or having no opinion.

School vouchers that would allow parents to send their children to private as well as public schools was another issue that clearly distinguished the two gubernatorial candidates. While neither side had a clear majority, voters supported vouchers for even private schools by a margin of 47% to 37% with the remaining 16% having no opinion on the issue.

In 1998 the lottery served as a major issue that helped Hodges across the state as well as in Aiken County. In 1998 Hodges won 57% of the vote from those who favored the lottery in the county. In the 2000 election, Aiken and the state as a whole passed the lottery by nearly the same margin of 54%. But in 2002 the lottery did not help Hodges nearly as much. He lost the vote among lottery supporters (46% to 54%) as well as among opponents (18% to 82%), despite the fact that a plurality of Aiken County voters felt the lottery was “good for South Carolina” (45% “good” versus 28% not, with 27% having mixed feelings).

Ironically, the lottery may have helped Sanford more than Hodges this year. Sanford has proposed that lottery money be shifted from college scholarships to help k-12 education. A clear majority of 56% of Aiken County voters agreed with this position. Only 18% disagreed with this proposal, while 20% had mixed feelings. The remaining 6% had no opinion on the issue.

We asked voters what the single most important issue was for them in the governor’s election. For Hodges’ voters, the most important issues were education (55%), the economy (9%), character related matters (9%), and party (8%). Sanford voters spread their most important concerns over a wider range of issues. Education was still most important, but the percentage naming education was considerably lower at 28%. The other most important issues for Sanford voters were character related issues (19%), party (11%), the economy (11%), and taxes (7%). Significant but small numbers of Sanford voters mentioned issues not mentioned at all by Hodges voters: need for change (6%), the removal of the Confederate flag (2%), and abortion (1%). In comparing votes of those on each issue, the only group of voters who voted for Hodges were those who

named education as their most important issue, where Hodges barely won, 53% to 47%. Among those naming all other issues, Sanford easily won.

Spending Cuts?

The new Republican governor and the Republican majorities in both houses of the General Assembly face a difficult dilemma in meeting expectations of Aiken County voters. We asked voters where they would be willing to cut services and raise taxes in light of the current state budget shortfall. Voters overwhelmingly rejected all cuts in every spending area we asked about, which together account for about 90% of the state's budget. Cutting k-12 education spending? 91% opposed. Cutting higher education spending? 80% opposed. Cutting health care spending? 88% opposed. Cutting police and prisons? 69% opposed. Cutting spending on roads? 73% opposed. Cutting environmental spending? 65% opposed.

Taxes

With the exception of raising the tobacco and alcohol tax, voters were strongly opposed to a range of possible tax increases. 88% opposed raising income taxes. 69% opposed raising sales taxes. 60% of those who had opinions on raising the gasoline tax opposed the increase. However, 74% favored raising tobacco taxes and 58% favored raising the tax on alcohol. To balance the state's budget and meet voter expectations will be a severe test of leadership for the new administration.

U.S. Senate Election

In the U.S. Senate race, clear issue differences existed between Republican and current U.S. Representative Lindsay Graham and former College of Charleston President and Appeals Court Judge Alex Sanders, the Democrat. We asked voters about several of these issues. Graham favors allowing taxpayers to invest a portion of their Social Security taxes into the stock market. Voters supported this option by a margin of 49% to 40%. The remaining 11% had no opinion.

In their debates candidates Sanders and Graham differed on the question of the ballistic fingerprinting of firearms. Sanders strongly supported the registration of this information while Graham was skeptical. Voters clearly supported the Sanders' position by a margin of 64% to 18%, with the remaining 18% either undecided or having no opinion.

The issue of national security and a possible war with Iraq did not clearly distinguish these two candidates, as both Graham and Sanders expressed support for the President's actions. However, as a Republican, Graham certainly would be perceived as standing closer to the President here. When asked to name the most important issue in determining their vote in the Senate race, national security related issues were named most often (34%). Those voters supported Graham by a margin of 78% to 20%. Character related issues (17%) were the next closest area. Graham also took that group of voters by four to one. Even among those voters who named Social Security and health care as their most important issue area (10%), Graham won by twenty percentage points (59% to 39%).

Should We Go to War in Iraq

On the question of war with Iraq, voters are divided and perhaps not as hawkish as one might think from their vote in the Senate election. We asked them the same question that the CBS/*N.Y. Times* poll has been asking Americans. "Which statement do you agree with more? Iraq presents such a clear danger to American interests that the United States needs to act now, even without the support of its allies. OR, The U.S. needs to wait for its allies before taking any action against Iraq."

More voters wanted to wait for allied support than "act now," by a margin of 44% to 38%. We also allowed voters to choose an answer stating that they "opposed the war in either case," and 13% chose that response. The remaining 5% had no opinion.