

The 2004 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 Methods class performed an exit poll of Aiken County voters in the November 2, 2004 general election. Comparing the results of the sample of 649 voters to countywide results showed that the sample was an accurate representation of the county's voters. In the weeks to come, students will be testing hypotheses and writing research papers on their findings. Presented below are preliminary findings that provide explanations for the choices county voters made in the Presidential and Senate elections.

Methodology and Participants

The survey included voters chosen systematically from eleven 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 71%, meaning that just over seven of every ten voters approached by students completed the survey. The sampling error for questions answered by all respondents is + or - 4%.

Dr. Botsch's classes have been performing exit polls since the early 1980s. This year the student/interviewers were Keila Auvenshine, Robert Benjamin, Andrea Capers, Chastan Collins, Jason Crane, Kathrina Flynn, Stephanie Fraley, Mary Gordon, Paul Hampton, Tiffany Hill, Kim Jennings, Tiffany Layne, Kim Lever, Bobby Lott, Danny Mills, Kayla Ott, Lawanda Rouch, and Alexis Simmons. Christy Randall and Laura Shick assisted in interviewer training. Ms. Shick provided invaluable help in supervising interviewers on election day as well as in data cleaning and loading. Questions should be directed to Robert E. Botsch, Professor of Political Science at USCA.

Voter Choice and Partisanship

In the county President Bush won just under two thirds of all votes cast and Senate candidate Jim DeMint trailed that margin by four percentage points, winning just over three-fifths of the vote. Both of these lopsided Republican victories in the county rested heavily on partisanship and turnout. Issues played significant but clearly secondary roles.

Aiken continues to be one of the strongest Republican counties in South Carolina. In this year's election, 55% identified themselves as Republicans compared to 51% in the last Presidential election in 2000. In the last two off-presidential elections, 2002 and 1998, the Republicans were about 55% of the electorate in the county. Democrats have remained at virtually the same

percentage of the electorate, 32%. The additional Republicans participating in the 2004 election helped Bush slightly increase his 2000 vote in the county. That increased turnout among Republican voters also occurred across the nation and contributed to Bush's national victory.

Ideology

Political ideology, which generally refers to the role that people feel government should play, leaned, not surprisingly, in the conservative direction. Almost exactly half identified themselves on the conservative side of the spectrum. About a fourth see themselves in the middle, and about a fifth are on the liberal side. The remaining voters, just under one in ten, did not know where to place themselves or refused to identify themselves. Appeals to conservative values clearly resonate with Aiken County voters.

Most Important Issues

Much has been made of the issues that voters identified as most important in the Presidential race in national exit surveys. In particular, much has been said about a plurality of voters (22%) choosing "values" as their most important issue. Unfortunately, the national exit surveys used a closed ended question to reach this conclusion. Many commentators have interpreted this as suggesting that gay marriage and abortion were the values that most voters were thinking about, largely because those choosing "values" split heavily for Bush. However, because this was a closed ended question, we really cannot know exactly what these voters were thinking.

In our exit poll, we employed an open-ended question when asking voters what the single most important issue was for them in the Presidential election. Thus we do know what they were thinking. For 36% it was the war on terrorism or the war in Iraq, and they split about two to one in the Bush direction. The next most important issue was character, at 18%. Voters most frequently mentioned such terms as strength or honesty. These voters also heavily favored Bush. About 11% mentioned something about the economy or jobs or the deficit, and these favored Kerry. Partisan related comments, experience, or incumbency were mentioned by just about 9% of all voters, and these also favored Bush. Finally, 5% of voters mentioned abortion or gay marriage as their most important issue. Clearly this was a significant group, but it is far less than the 22% that national commentators attributed to these issues. Other issues such as education, health, social security, and the environment did help Kerry, but far too

few voters were moved on these issues to give the Democratic challenger a chance in the county.

In the U.S. Senate race, the most important issues were character (12%) and party or ideology (also 12%). Both of these groups broke heavily in DeMint's direction. Portraying himself as a close teammate of President Bush worked well in this heavily Republican County for DeMint. The 5% who listed education voted strongly for Tenenbaum. About 4% listed abortion or gay marriage, and as expected these voted for DeMint. This race seemed mostly about party, ideology, and strong character.

The War in Iraq

We asked voters whether "Going to war in Iraq was a mistake." While more voters rejected the statement than accepted it, support for the war fell short of a clear majority. Just under half disagreed that it was a mistake. Slightly less than a third agreed that Iraq was a mistake, and the remaining fifth of the voters had mixed feelings. This issue had a great impact on voting choice. Those who felt that it was a mistake voted overwhelmingly for Kerry (86%). On the other hand, 90% of those who disagreed with the statement that the war was a mistake went for Bush. Those in the middle split in the Bush direction by three to two. The critical fact here is that the largest group supported the war and they voted to re-elect an incumbent president who successfully portrayed himself as a "wartime president."

Religious Fundamentalism

Voters were asked if they identified themselves as religious fundamentalists. Just under 40% applied the label to themselves, while over 60% did not identify themselves as fundamentalists. Because so many African Americans are fundamentalists (55%) and also supported Kerry, religious fundamentalism alone did not help explain voting choice. Looking at white voters alone, just over a third were self-identified fundamentalists. These fundamentalist whites supported Bush over Kerry by nine to one. White non-fundamentalists also supported Bush, but the split was lower at seven to three.

Economic Change

In past elections an excellent predictor of voting choice has been how people perceive any changes in their personal economic condition. Those who feel that their condition has improved generally support the incumbent and those who feel that it has become worse generally support the challenger. We asked voters the following: "Financially speaking, are you and your family better off today than you

were four years ago?” Almost 40% said they were better off, and as expected, they chose Bush at right about eight to one. Only just over 20% felt their situation had worsened, and they chose Kerry by a little more than two to one. The almost 30% who felt no change broke in the Bush direction by just under two to one. Clearly changes in economic conditions were not perceived as bad enough in Aiken County to tempt voters to throw out the incumbent.

Social Security

Whether to reform social security was an important issue in both the Presidential and Senate campaigns. We asked voters whether they “oppose or favor allowing individuals to put a portion of their Social Security taxes in the stock market.” Voters split 56% to 44% favoring this idea, and the issue helped both Bush and DeMint. More than eight in ten voters who favored the idea supported Bush and just under eight in ten supported DeMint. The Democrats won majorities of those who opposed the idea, but not by nearly as large a margin.

The IRS and an National Sales Tax

Another issue of particular importance in the Senate elections was whether to reform the IRS. It may have also played a minor role at the Presidential level in that Bush had talked about considering this change, but for the moment had rejected the idea. We asked voters the following: “How do you feel about replacing the federal income tax with a sales tax that applies to all goods that you buy?” Aiken County voters were split roughly into thirds on this question, with just over a third opposing the idea, just under a third favoring it, and right at a third having mixed feelings. Among those who favored the idea, 85% voted for Bush and 85% also voted for DeMint. Among those who opposed the idea, 55% voted for Kerry and 57% voted for Tenenbaum. Tenenbaum had made opposition to this idea as perhaps the greatest reason to not vote for DeMint. Although this issue did not help either of the Republicans, many who opposed the idea voted for the Republican candidates despite their disagreement. Other factors overrode this particular issue.

Pregnant Single Teachers

One of the most controversial events in the Senate race was DeMint’s comments about who should be allowed to teach in the public schools. He said that gays should not be allowed to teach and later in an interview in Aiken included pregnant single teachers who live with their boyfriends as undesirables. Later he attempted to diffuse these issues by saying he regretted the statements because they distracted from the real issues, but he never backed away from the

statements. We asked about one of these issues in our exit poll. We asked voters whether they agreed that “Single women who become pregnant should not be allowed to teach in the public schools.” More than three in five voters disagreed with this statement, while the other two were evenly split between agreement and having mixed feelings. Nevertheless, the statement did not cost DeMint many votes. He won by margins of nearly four to one among those who agreed with him or had mixed feelings, and he even won by 52% to 48% among those who disagreed with his position. The election was not a referendum on this aspect of DeMint’s character.