

# **The 2006 Election Aiken County Exit Poll: A Descriptive Analysis**

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**All conclusions in this report are solely those of the author  
and do not represent any position or opinion of the University of South  
Carolina Aiken.**

## **Introduction**

Students in Dr. Robert E. Botsch's Political Science Research Methods class performed an exit poll of Aiken County voters in the 2006 general election. The sample of 633 voters were 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 highlights of the survey ranging from local issues through key state elections to national issues.

## **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 66%, meaning that about two-thirds of those 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 Valerie Antaki, James Browning, Matt Burroughs, Linda Burton, Paul Cromer, Lehe Drowdy, Cynthia Firster-Blume, Allison Gordon, Julie-Kate Keeney, Tracy LeGarde, Erin McCullough, Chris McHale, Miranda Parker, Henry Pommells, Dequawn Smith, Lauren Spence, Matt Spivey, Afton Walters, and Bobby Lott. Christy Randall and Kim Jennings, who work in the USA Social Sciences and Business Research Lab, provided help in training the students and in supervising them 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.

## **Pet Licensing and Spay/Neutering**

We asked voters whether they would "support a county-wide dog and cat licensing requirement with higher fees for dogs and cats that have not been spayed or neutered." This has been an issue across the county in recent years with the City of Aiken adopting such a program and other governments considering this among other options for reducing the large numbers of unwanted pets in the county. We found overwhelming support for this proposal in the county as a whole with 56% supporting the proposal, 30% opposing it, and 14% undecided.

Support varied somewhat with the area we surveyed, though more supported than opposed the idea in all areas of the county. The most support came in precincts in the City of Aiken area, where the ratio of supporters to those opposed was 65% to 23% with the remainder undecided. The next most

supportive area was North Augusta, where supporters outnumbered those in opposition by more than two to one (57% to 26%). In precincts located in Horse Creek Valley, the support was about nine percentage points ahead of opposition (45% to 36%). Support was lowest in rural precincts, but even here supporters were more numerous (47% to 41%).

The number of pets that voters have in their households also had a bearing on answers to this question. Those with no pets (38% of all voters) were most supportive of a strict licensing program with 63% indicating that they supported the idea versus 19% in opposition. Support declined as the number of pets increased: 53% supported the idea among those with one pet versus 31% in opposition (28% of all voters); 54% supported among those with two pets versus 37% in opposition (who were 16% of all voters); 50% supported among those with three versus 40% in opposition (8% of all voters); and 48% supported among those with four or more pets versus 44% in opposition (10% of all voters). Even though support clearly drops and the number of pets increases, we found at least a plurality of support among all groups of pet owners.

### **The Gubernatorial Election, Issues and Partisanship**

Aiken County is a solid Republican County and has been since the late 1980s. In recent elections and in the 2006 election, a clear majority of voters, 55%, self-identified as Republicans. This usually gives the Republican candidates for any office a clear and insurmountable advantage. For example, in the 2002 gubernatorial election, Republican Mark Sanford won over 60% of the county-wide vote. In 2006 the situation was somewhat different with Aiken County having favorite son Senator Tommy Moore running on the Democratic side. Not surprisingly, Moore did better in the county in 2006 with than Democrat Jim Hodges did in 2002, but the Republican incumbent Governor Sanford still won a majority of the county by a 52% to 48% difference.

We asked voters what was the most important issue for them in the governor's race. The single most frequently volunteered issue was education, mentioned by 27% of all voters. This issue worked well for Senator Moore, who won three-fourths of all these voters. However, in the next three most frequently mentioned issues, taxes, party or ideology, and character, each mentioned by about 15% of the voters, Sanford had the clear edge. Sanford won slightly more than half the voters mentioning party or ideology and those mentioning character, and he won three-fourths of the voters mentioning taxes. The combination of these three factors outweighed the education issue in the governor's election in the county.

As time goes on Democrats might become a little more competitive in the county because of the relationship of age to party identification. The oldest age groups in the county are the most Republican. Those over 60 are Republican by

a ratio of more than 2 to 1 (63% Republican versus 24% Democrat). Those under 35 years of age still lean heavily in the Republican direction, but the ratio drops to 5 to 4 (49% Republican versus 38% Democrat).

The in-migration of people who do not regard themselves as “southerners” also has long term partisan implications. This is a growing group in the population, making up about 10% of the voting population in the last few elections. Unlike “native” southerners and those who consider themselves “converted” southerners, who are about 58% Republican, “non-Southerners” are evenly divided between the two parties with about 38% identifying with each party.

### **Vouchers for Private Schools and the Superintendent of Education Election**

One of the most important issues at the state level in recent years has been whether parents should be provided with education vouchers that could be used in private schools or tax credits for the tuition paid for private schools, an idea that has been supported by Governor Sanford. Well financed interest groups have involved themselves in campaigns across the state in recent years supporting candidates who support vouchers or tuition tax credits. Supporters argue that these approaches will provide parents with greater choice and force all schools to operate more efficiently. Opponents argue that either of these ideas will necessarily take money from public schools that are already underfunded and subsidize wealthy parents who already send their children to private schools. This issue played a small role in the governor’s election and a relatively much larger role in the extremely close race for State Superintendent of Education.

We asked Aiken County voters how they felt about the tax credits and vouchers, using what is called the “balanced argument” approach. Voters read the following statement and then responded whether they favored or opposed tax credits and vouchers or had mixed feelings: “Some people say that giving parents tuition tax credits or vouchers for private or religious schools would improve education while others say it would undermine public education.”

Among Aiken County voters, 36% favored tax credits or vouchers, 32% had mixed opinions or no opinion, and 33% opposed both ideas. Opinion among voters was rather evenly divided.

The positions voters took on this issue had a great influence on votes in the Superintendent of Education election. Among those who favored tax credits or vouchers, Karen Floyd won 74% of the vote. Among those who opposed vouchers, Jim Rex won 61% of the vote. However, Floyd won 65% of those who were undecided on this issue, largely because of party identification. That gave her the clear majority of 57% that she had in the county, even though she lost state-wide in one of the closest votes in the state’s history.

## **Ideology and Religious Fundamentalism**

Political ideology, which generally refers to the role that people feel government should play, leaned, not surprisingly, in the conservative direction. Just over half of all voters identified themselves on the conservative side of the spectrum. About a fourth saw themselves in the middle, and about a fifth were on the liberal side. These are almost precisely the same proportions as we saw in the county in the 2004 election. Appeals to conservative values clearly resonate with Aiken County voters.

The most conservative group of voters was white self-identified religious fundamentalists, 72% of whom saw themselves as conservatives. Only 7% of these whites saw themselves as liberals. This is significant because white fundamentalists made up about 30% of all voters. However, even whites who were not religious fundamentalists were heavily conservative by a ratio of 47% conservative to 25% liberal. On the other hand, African-Americans, who were mostly fundamentalist (56%) and comprised about 15% of all voters in the county, broke in the liberal direction by a ratio of 34% liberal to 26% conservative.

## **The War in Iraq**

We asked voters whether “going to war in Iraq was a mistake,” the same question we asked voters in 2004. Strikingly, while voters across the nation have moved in the direction of questioning the war, with polls in recent months showing that well over half of the population saw the war as a “mistake, Aiken County voters remained virtually unchanged since 2004. The percentage who saw the war as “a mistake” only increased by two percentage points from 30% in 2004 to 32% in 2006, a statistically insignificant change. Those disagreeing that the war was “a mistake” only dropped from 49% to 47%, again an insignificant shift.

Just as in the case of voting in the governor’s election, partisanship strongly explained opinions on the war. The strong Republican preferences among Aiken County voters provided President Bush with a high flood wall against the anti-war national tide. Among the strong majority of Republicans in the county, 68% rejected the characterization of the Iraq war as a mistake, while among the minority of Democrats, 65% saw the war as a mistake.

## Most Important Future National Security Priorities

We asked voters what they thought “should be the two most important national security priorities for the White House and Congress over the next few years,” and then gave them a list from which to choose. This is an identical question that has been asked before the 2006 election in a national survey. The table below gives the frequency of mentions of each issue as among the top two priorities.

	<u>Percentage Listing in Top Two</u>	
	<u>Aiken County</u>	<u>National Poll*</u>
reducing dependence on foreign oil:	49%	42%
combating terrorism:	49%	26%
addressing dangerous countries like Iran and North Korea:	30%	21%
securing our ports, nuclear plants and chemical factories:	27%	21%
the war in Iraq:	20%	25%
strengthening America’s military:	18%	12%

\* Note: Poll by the Democracy Corps, Stan Greenburg, August 27, 2006, reported by Thomas Friedman, “For Voters, Energy is the Top Security Issue,” *The State* (October 14, 2006) A13.

The similarity between Aiken County voters and national opinion is striking. Despite the differences in partisan preferences, Aiken County voters also clearly identify greater energy independence as a top priority for the national government to address in the months to come. Citizens may be realizing that energy dependence on Middle Eastern nations is contributing to many of the other security problems we face. Whether this much agreement extends to accepting painful measures that may be necessary for greater independence, such as higher energy taxes, is of course a different question.