

The 2008 Election Aiken County Exit Poll: A Descriptive Analysis

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Authors:

Patrick Long, Political Science Honor Student
Robert Botsch, Professor of Political Science and SSBR Lab Director

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**All conclusions in this report are solely those of the authors
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Carolina Aiken.**

Executive Summary

The 2008 Aiken County exit poll performed by political science students produced a statistically accurate sample of voters across the county. In this report we examine a variety of factors to explain voting choice in the presidential election between Democrat Barack Obama and Republican John McCain as well as a few additional questions not related to voting choice.

- While a variety of factors explained voting choice, partisanship was by far the most powerful explanatory factor. While McCain easily won the county, Democrat Obama did slightly better than John Kerry did in 2004 mostly because the electorate was slightly more Democratic in partisan balance.
- Younger voters, who actually gave Obama more votes than McCain, were shifting away from the Republicans. If this trend continues, it could pose problems for Republicans in the future.
- Job approval ratings for President Bush, which have been falling every year nationally and in Aiken County, also created some drag in support for Republican McCain. More than twice as many Aiken County voters disapproved of Bush's job performance than approved of it, and they voted overwhelmingly for Obama. McCain was saved by those with mixed feelings about Bush.
- For the first time, more voters in the county felt the Iraq War was a mistake than not. Those voters saw the war as a mistake also favored Obama. But once again, McCain won the county by winning most of the votes of those with mixed feelings about the war.
- About one in five voters insisted that Obama was a Muslim, despite readily available information to the contrary. These voters were almost all white, were less politically knowledgeable, and were less likely to follow news in newspapers, on television, or on the internet. They voted overwhelmingly for McCain.
- Prior to the election many observers feared that the election would be decided on racially based voting that might further divide the nation along racial lines. A careful examination of Aiken County voters revealed some evidence of race based voting. However, most black voters voted for

Obama because of shared partisan identification, not because of racial identity. Obama did benefit from increased black turnout and higher partisan loyalty than in past elections. Most white voters voted against Obama because he was a Democrat, not because of race. However, Obama won a lower percentage of the white vote than he might have because of the presence of some feelings of ethnic antipathy. We were able to estimate the influence of ethnic identity among blacks and ethnic antipathy among whites and concluded that while the election in the county would have been much closer, McCain still would have won the county.

- The addition of Alaska Governor Palin to the Republican ticket was one of the most covered aspects of the 2008 campaign. When allowed to make a separate vice presidential choice, Aiken County voters' vice presidential preferences showed Palin trailing McCain. This suggests that on the balance Governor Palin was a slight drag on the Republican ticket.
- Retrospective voting, or voting to punish or reward the incumbent or the party of the incumbent based on past performance, played a role in Aiken County voters' decisions. More than 40% of the voters felt that their family's economic condition has worsened, and these voters punished Republican McCain giving nearly two-thirds of their votes to Obama. However, both those who felt they were better off and those who perceived no change voted overwhelmingly for McCain.
- We asked voters about the \$700 billion economic bailout/rescue package passed by Congress. While their opinions played no role in presidential voting choice, more opposed the package than supported it.
- We also examined the professed political ideology of voters. Aiken County was a relatively more conservative compared to voters across the nation. Conservatism was related to the age of voters with younger voters relatively less conservative (though still conservative in balance) and older voters relatively more conservative.

Introduction

Students in Dr. Robert E. Botsch's Political Science Research Methods class performed an exit poll of Aiken County voters in the November 4, 2008 general election. Comparing the presidential voting preferences of the sample of 721 voters to countywide election results showed that the sample was a statistically accurate representation of the county's voters. The research methodology for the survey is at the end of this report.

In the weeks to come, students will be testing hypotheses and writing research papers on their findings. Hopefully, as in the past, some of these papers will be presented at academic conferences.

Presented below are descriptions and some initial analysis of the opinions and preferences that Aiken County voters. We placed particular emphasis on presidential voting choice because of the historic nature of the 2008 election.

Voter Choice and Partisanship

In the county, Senator John McCain won 61% of all votes cast and Senator Barack Obama finished with 37% of the votes. Third party candidates won the remaining votes. Though McCain won the county by what political scientists would call a landslide, he slipped by five percentage points from the 2004 Bush landslide of 66%. This five percentage point slippage is the same slippage as Republicans suffered nationally, with Bush winning 51% of the national vote in 2004 and McCain winning 46% of the national vote in 2008.

While a number of factors explain McCain's win in Aiken County, partisanship played the primary role in determining the countywide outcome. Aiken is still one of the strongest Republican counties in South Carolina, but it is not quite as secure as in the past. In the 2008 election, 50% of the voters identified themselves as Republicans compared to 56% in 2004. That slippage almost precisely matches the decline in percentage of votes for the Republican presidential nominee.

Democrats slightly increased their percentage of identifiers among voters across the county from 32% in 2004 to 34% in 2008.

Partisan identity was the single most powerful predictor of voting choice. The election of 2008 was no exception. About 95% of those identifying with their respective parties voted for their party's nominee. This is higher than party loyalty

nationally where, according to national exit polls, about 90% of the identifiers of both parties voted for their respective nominees.

Republicans usually have a little added advantage in that they are often somewhat more loyal than Democrats in voting for their party's nominee. However, in 2008 partisans of both parties were equally loyal both in Aiken and nationally. The excitement among Democrats nationally for their nominee seems to have extended to Aiken County.

Independents in Aiken County split for McCain 52% to 48%, a difference that was slightly but not significantly smaller than in 2004 when Bush won independents by 53% to 47%.

The Youth Vote

According to national exit polls, across the nation Obama did far better among younger voters from the ages of 18-29 than McCain, winning by a margin of more than two to one (66% to 32%). Moreover, young voters increased their proportion of the total national electorate by about a percentage point, from 17% to 18% of all voters. This increased turnout amplified Obama's advantage a bit. This was a far greater advantage than Kerry enjoyed over Bush in the 2004 election when Kerry won the youth vote, but won by less than ten percentage points.

We saw a similar pattern among Aiken County voters over the last two presidential elections. Kerry did relatively better among younger voters than older voters in 2004, winning 44% of those under 30 years of age. Obama greatly increased that advantage in 2008, winning a clear majority, 54%.

Just as nationally, younger voters increased their turnout relatively more in Aiken County than older voters. In 2004 those under 30 comprised 18% of all Aiken County voters. In 2008 they increased their share of the vote to 20%.

The relationship between age and vote is shown in the table below. We see that as age increases, the percentage voting Republican increases and the percentage voting for the Democratic candidate decreases. Democrat Obama won the vote among the youngest age group, was reasonably competitive among the middle aged group, and lost among older voters. Older voters were the largest group by far, which gave McCain a clear advantage in the county.

Table 1. Age and Vote

	<u>18-29</u>	<u>30-49</u>	<u>50+</u>	<u>TOTAL</u>
Obama:	71 55%	104 46%	102 34%	277
McCain:	58 45%	134 54%	198 66%	380
TOTAL:	129 100.0%	228 100.0%	300 100.0%	657

The question is what will happen in the future as these younger voters age and older voters leave the scene. While younger voters are not yet a large enough group to endanger the Republican dominance of the county, Republicans do have cause for concern if current trends continue. Because most of their support comes from the oldest voters, Republicans need to win a larger share of younger voters in coming years to remain dominant in the county.

Democrats, on the other hand, need to continue to win younger voters and hold on to the current generation of younger voters if they are to become competitive in the future. Holding on to the current group of younger voters is likely to be the easier task. A large body of political science research concludes that party loyalty becomes fixed by the late 20's and rarely changes after that. The strong Republican advantage among older voters rests on the popularity of Ronald Reagan in the 1980s, when many of these voters were forming their own partisan loyalties. Surveys we did back in the 1980s show that Republicans gained plurality status in the county late in that decade. Extending that observation to today, we might conclude that the chances for Democrats to become competitive in Aiken County rests with the popularity and success of the Obama administration. Democrats have a long way to go in the county, but they seem to have taken the first step.

The Bush Factor

The election of 2008 was to a great extent a referendum on the Bush presidency. Bush's collapsing approval ratings gave a great advantage to the candidate who could be seen as the agent of change. Even though both presidential candidates attempted to present themselves as change candidates, that task was much greater for McCain, who had to run under the same party label as President Bush. 2008 was not a great year for the Republican brand.

In Aiken County, Bush's job approval ratings continued to fall from what we saw in previous surveys, as we see in the table below.

Table 2. Approval of Presidential Job Performance Over Time

Year:	2001	2003	2005	2007	2008
% App:	83%	59%	47%	40%	22%

The 2001 county-wide telephone survey was performed only a few weeks after the attacks of 9/11 when the nation rallied around the commander-in-chief. But after that approval fell dramatically. That the 2008 nominee of the president's party was able to win the election in the county by landslide proportions speaks to the dominance of party loyalty over presidential performance and to the success that McCain had in disassociating himself from the Bush presidency.

Nevertheless, Bush's low approval ratings were related to presidential vote, as we can see in the table below. Of those who disapproved of Bush's job performance, the largest group of voters, 80% voted for Obama. Not surprisingly, McCain won nearly all of the votes of those who approved of the job the president had been doing. But this was the smallest group. What saved McCain was winning almost 90% of the votes of those who had mixed feelings about Bush's performance, the second largest group.

Table 3. Presidential Job Performance and Vote

	<u>Approve</u>	<u>mixed</u>	<u>Disapprove</u>	<u>TOTAL</u>
Obama:	9 6%	21 11%	250 80%	280
McCain:	138 94%	176 89%	64 20%	378
TOTAL:	147 100%	198 100%	313 100%	658

The War in Iraq

Aiken County has now seen a noticeable shift in opinions about the Iraq War. Every election year since the war began in the spring of 2003 we have been asking about whether voters thought the war was a “mistake.” The table below shows the shifts that have been taking place over the last three elections.

Table 4. Views About the Iraq War Over Time

Year:	2004	2006	2008
Not mistake	49%	45%	34%
Mixed feelings	21%	21%	25%
Mistake	30%	34%	41%

Support for the war has been declining among Aiken County voters in each successive election just as it has been declining nationally. In the 2008 election, voters opposed to the war outnumbered those supporting the war for the first time, by a margin of about 4 to 3. In national exit polls, the difference was even greater with those voters disapproving the war outnumbering those approving by more than 3 to 2.

Just as the case in presidential job performance, position on the war made a difference in voting choice, as we can see in the table below.

Table 5. Views on the Iraq War and Vote

	<u>Mistake</u>	<u>mixed</u>	<u>Not Mistake</u>	<u>TOTAL</u>
Obama:	221 80%	40 23%	23 10%	284
McCain:	55 20%	136 77%	214 90%	405
TOTAL:	276 100%	176 100%	237 100%	659

Obama did very well among those voters who thought the war was a mistake, winning 80% of their votes. Though this was the largest group of voters, McCain more than offset those losses by winning 90% of those who felt the war was not a mistake, and nearly 80% of the group with mixed feelings.

Religion—The “Muslim” Issue

Religion was a recurring theme in this year’s Presidential election and a persistent source of misinformation. Because of Barack Obama’s unusual name and because of continuing false rumors spread over the internet, news reports suggested that a significant number of voters thought that Obama was Muslim or insisted that he was a secret Muslim. The questions were how many voters held this belief and whether it would cost him votes.

We asked voters about their perception of Obama’s religion: “Do you happen to know the religion of Barack Obama?” The correct answer was Protestant, but only 29% of the respondents gave the correct answer. More importantly, nearly one in five (19.3%) misidentified him as Muslim. Most of the rest of the voters simply said that they did not know (40%).

This misconception about his religion hurt Obama at the polls. Among those who thought Obama was Muslim, Obama lost nearly nine in ten votes (86% McCain), but among those who gave any other answer, right or wrong, he nearly split evenly with McCain (51% McCain to 49% Obama).

Who were the voters who believed this falsehood? Almost all were white (88%). They were more likely to self-identify as Republicans than whites in general (77% versus 63%). They were more than twice as likely as other whites to feel that “blacks have too much influence” in politics (30% versus 14%). They were more likely than other whites to feel that the Confederate Flag should be kept flying on the statehouse grounds in Columbia (81% versus 57%). These relationships strongly suggest that some feelings of ethnic antipathy may have played a role in willingness to believe this falsehood.

One might hypothesize that people who believed this falsehood would be less educated. Indeed, a statistically significant difference did exist, but it was only half a year of education. Whites who believed this myth had an average of 14.5 years of education and those who did not think Obama to be a Muslim had an average of 15.1 years of formal education.

Following the news made a greater difference. Those who believed the myth were significantly less likely to have read about the news in a daily newspaper, to have watched television news, or to have followed the news on the internet. Not surprisingly, they were also less knowledgeable about politics generally, scoring significantly lower on the four political knowledge questions we asked (terms of

U.S. Senators, which party controlled the House and Senate, and the number of U.S. soldiers killed in Iraq).

Race—Fears and Reality

Barack Obama is the first president without a predominantly western European background and the first with African ancestry. His candidacy presented the first opportunity for white Americans to vote for a major party presidential candidate who was black, and the first opportunity black Americans had to vote for a major party presidential candidate who shared their own ethnic identity.

Obama's candidacy naturally evoked a range of concerns and fears. Would whites vote for an African American? Would there be a "Bradley factor" in which whites told pollsters they would vote for Obama but then actually vote for McCain? Would blacks greatly increase their turnout and make a difference? Would Hispanics vote for a member of a different minority? Would Jews vote for an African-American?

The media speculated on all these questions and on some feigned insults, such as the claim from some whites who charged that Democrats were unfairly calling them racists for supporting a white candidate over a black candidate. Their counter-charge was that if they were racially motivated in their own voting, blacks were also racially motivated in voting for a black just because Obama was black.

For the most part these fears proved unfounded. The national tracking polls got the results correct—no Bradley effect existed. Hispanics and Jews did give Obama strong support, helping him win key states like New Mexico, Colorado, Nevada, Florida, Pennsylvania, and Ohio.

Blacks did increase their turnout nationally from 11% of the total vote to 13%, the same percentage as the percentage of blacks in the population. According to national exit polls, blacks gave Obama 95% of their votes. But this was only marginally higher than the percentage of black votes Kerry won in 2004.

In Aiken County, our exit poll suggests that black voting was up a couple of percentage points, though at this writing official figures are not yet available. Black voters gave Obama 97% of their votes. This is up from the 85% they gave to Kerry in Aiken County in 2004. The overwhelming majority of African Americans voted for Obama because he was a Democrat, not because he was black. Nevertheless, what political scientists call "identity politics" played a role in both increased black turnout and increased voting percentage for Obama.

Historical precedents exist for this phenomenon. In the 1960 election we saw an even more significant shift in which Catholics voted in great numbers and chose fellow Catholic John Kennedy, giving him 80% of their votes, far more than they usually gave a Democrat. We could draw the same conclusions about religious fundamentalists who flocked to George Bush in 2000 and 2004, someone they considered one of their own.

How about whites? Were they willing to vote for a black? While McCain did get more white votes than Obama, Obama did win a significant number of votes from whites. Nationally Obama won 43% of votes among whites. In Aiken County he won 25% of the white vote. While white support in Aiken County trailed Obama's national support, it was slightly better than the support that Democrat John Kerry received among white voters in Aiken County in 2004 when Democrat Kerry won 24% of the white vote.

On the face of this, whites in Aiken County seemed to have voted against Barack Obama because he was a Democrat, not because of his ethnicity. However, given all the conditions that had changed since 2004, a very unpopular president, an increasingly unpopular war that McCain strongly supported, an economic meltdown and increases in the percentage of families who felt they were worse off, we might ask why Obama outperformed Kerry by only one percentage point among white voters in the county? Should he not have done considerably better? Did the fact that Obama was a black candidate dampen gains a Democrat might have made among white voters?

To try and get at this question, we needed to measure attitudes of whites toward blacks and then separate the impact of these attitudes from the influence of party on vote, no small task.

Measuring attitudes concerning race is one of the most challenges in public opinion polling. Most respondents quickly spot any question that hints at interracial feelings and give a socially acceptable response regardless of actual feelings. Almost no one wants to be labeled as "prejudiced." Therefore pollsters attempt to get at feelings toward other races indirectly with questions that only partially tap feelings of mild resentment, antipathy, or negative stereotypes rather than ask about more extreme feelings of prejudice.

Our exit poll included a series of such questions. We asked whether a series of groups have too much, too little, or just about the right amount of influence in politics. One of the groups we asked about was blacks, in addition to the elderly, whites, and the wealthy. We also asked about support for continuing to fly the Confederate Battle Flag on the statehouse grounds in Columbia. Finally, we asked the question about Obama's religion, a question we explored earlier that seemed to tap some element of ethnic antipathy.

A statistical procedure called factor analysis indicated that these three questions had an underlying common factor that each question picked up about equally. This finding suggested that creating a compound variable using these three questions was justified. We recoded each of the questions so that the answer to each that might tap some ethnic antipathy was scored as a "1" and other answers scored as "0." Adding all answers together created a new variable with a four point scale ranging from 0 to 3. Zero corresponded to not giving any answers that were tainted by ethnic antipathy. Three was the score for answering all the questions in a manner that might indicate ethnic antipathy.

A number of other variables were associated with higher scores of ethnic antipathy among whites. As age increased, scores increased. This is no surprise in that the Republican "southern strategy" of the 1960s, 70s and 80s, was aimed at attracting southern whites on the basis of their disapproval of the civil rights movement. This was the period in which the South underwent a political realignment from solid Democrat to reliably Republican because so many whites became Republicans. Young whites entering the electorate back then are the older white voters of today.

In addition, those with higher scores of ethnic antipathy were more likely to self-identify as religious fundamentalists and as political conservatives. Regional identity played a strong role. We asked people whether they identified themselves as "native southerners," "converted southerners," or "non-southerners." Those who were native southerners had the highest ethnic antipathy scores and non-southerners had the lowest scores.

All of this is consistent with the influence of age and our observations about the southern strategy. Older people, who were more likely to score higher on ethnic antipathy, were more likely to be conservative, so this ties conservatism to ethnic antipathy. Non-southerners, along with converted southerners who mostly moved here after having lived outside the South, were not targets of the southern strategy and in many cases did not experience this political movement.

Higher scores on ethnic antipathy were significantly associated with fewer years of formal education completed, lower family income, less attention to news on television, even more strongly to less attention to news on the internet, and lower political knowledge. Again, this is no surprise. Less educated lower income working class voters were a primary target of the southern strategy.

Moreover, national studies of vote shifts in counties between 2004 and 2008 found that almost all the counties that shifted away from Democrats were counties with high concentrations of whites isolated from technological progress with low education and income, mainly in Appalachia. Our exit poll taps the same thing on an individual level.

The table below shows the relationship between this compound measure that taps some element of ethnic antipathy (E-A Score) and voting choice among whites in Aiken County.

Table 6. Ethnic Antipathy and Vote Among Whites

E-A Score:	<u>0</u>	<u>1</u>	<u>2</u>	<u>3</u>	<u>TOTAL</u>
Obama:	94 51%	35 18%	2 2%	0 0%	131
McCain:	90 49%	163 82%	97 98%	27 100%	377
TOTAL:	184 100%	198 100%	99 100%	27 100%	508

Those who scored zero, giving no answer that might tap ethnic antipathy, split their votes almost evenly between Obama and McCain. As ethnic antipathy scores increased, the percentage supporting Obama rapidly decreased. Two or more answers that might tap ethnic antipathy virtually ensured that the respondent did not vote for Obama.

To try and separate out the influence of party identification, we re-examined this relationship by controlling for party identification. The relationship between ethnic antipathy score and voting choice changed when we looked at the two partisan subgroups. Both Democrats and Republicans voted overwhelmingly for their party's nominee at all levels of ethnic antipathy. Increasing scores on ethnic antipathy had a much weaker impact on voting choice than we saw in the table above. Nevertheless, the impact remained statistically significant, suggesting that even among partisans, ethnic antipathy played some role.

Among partisan independents increasing scores on racial antipathy had a strong and profound impact. This relationship is shown in the table below.

Table 7. Ethnic Antipathy and Vote Among White Political Independents

E-A Score:	<u>0</u>	<u>1</u>	<u>2</u>	<u>3</u>	<u>TOTAL</u>
Obama:	31 67%	11 35%	0 0%	0 0%	42
McCain:	15 33%	21 66%	13 100%	7 100%	56
TOTAL:	46 100%	32 100%	13 100%	7 100%	98

Obama won by a margin of two to one among those whites with an ethnic antipathy score of zero. A score of one on the scale flipped the advantage to McCain by nearly two to one, and those scoring two or three all voted for McCain. Clearly ethnic antipathy made the most difference among independent whites when no party influence was present.

We did additional analysis to try and estimate exactly how many white votes Obama might have lost because of ethnic antipathy. This analysis involved several multiple regression procedures. Multiple regression attempts to predict one variable, in this case, voting choice, using a simple algebraic equation with several variables in it. First we used party identification and ethnic antipathy to predict votes among whites. This procedure indicated that both party and ethnic antipathy were significant predictors, but that party had about three times more influence than ethnic antipathy. This equation predicted that 26% of whites would vote for Obama. The actual percentage was 25%, so this two variable equation was a powerful predictor.

Then we reran the regression, dropping the ethnic antipathy variable, but using the same coefficient for party identification as in the two-variable equation. The effect of this was to eliminate the influence of ethnic antipathy on the predicted vote. Put another way, we were pretending that everything was the same except that all ethnic antipathy was removed, including ethnic antipathy that may have worked through party identification, in predicting how whites would have voted. This regression predicted that Obama would have received 35% of the white vote, a ten percentage point increase from what he actually received.

Looking at both whites and blacks, we might ask just how close the election would have been in the county if blacks turned out at about the same rate as 2004 and voted at the same rate for the Democratic candidate and if whites voted without any influence of ethnic antipathy. The black vote for Obama would

be 85% of the 20% of blacks who normally turn out in presidential elections in Aiken County, giving Obama $85\% \times 20\% = 17\%$ of the total vote. As calculated above, 35% of the whites, who are normally about 80% of the total vote, would have voted for Obama. This would have given Obama $35\% \times 80\% = 28\%$ of the total vote. Added together, Obama could have received $17\% + 28\% = 45\%$ of the vote rather than the 38% he actually received in a two party division of the vote.

In short, partisanship overshadowed racial motivations for voting among both whites and blacks. Fears and concerns before the election that race would determine the outcome were overblown. Racially based voting on the part of some whites and a few blacks partially cancelled each other out.

The Palin Factor—Did She Hurt or Help?

One of the most reported facets of the campaign was the surprise choice of Alaska Governor Sarah Palin by John McCain as his vice presidential running mate and her campaign activities. Pundits concluded that she helped McCain energize the social conservatives in the Republican base, but she may have cost McCain among less socially conservative leaning Republicans and independents. What impact did Palin have on Aiken County voters?

We asked voters whom they would choose as vice president if they could have cast a separate vice presidential vote. The key here is to see if Palin led or trailed McCain in support. Her level of support over Democrat Joe Biden ran seven percentage points behind the edge that McCain had over Obama. Even among white voters who self-identified as religious fundamentalists, the group that presumably would most identify with her, Palin ran six percentage points behind McCain. Only among white voters who self-identified themselves as “strong conservatives” did Palin run equally with McCain.

We might reasonably conclude that while Governor Palin may have brought a few more conservatives to the polls and injected more energy into a campaign that was severely lacking in energy, questions about her readiness to assume the presidency probably hurt McCain on the balance.

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 or the nominee of the incumbent’s party. Those who feel that it has become worse generally support the challenger or the nominee of the party that does not currently hold the White House. Political scientists call this retrospective voting.

We asked voters the following: “Financially speaking, are you and your family better off today than you were four years ago?” The distribution of opinion on perceived change in family financial situation was roughly similar to voters’ perceptions nationally. The comparison between Aiken County voters who expressed an opinion on this question and national voters (according to national exit polls) can be seen in the table below.

Table 8. Change in Family Economic Situation in Aiken County and the Nation

Change:	Better off	About the same	Worse off
Aiken County	31%	25%	44%
Nation	24%	34%	42%

Aiken County voters were somewhat more likely than national voters to feel their family’s financial condition had improved. (Incidentally, the 31% in the county who said they were “better off” was down from the 40% who felt that way in 2004.) Aiken voters were somewhat less likely to feel that their family’s financial situation had remained stable. But voters in the county and in the nation were almost identical in feeling that their condition had become worse.

Just as we observed in examining presidential job approval and feelings about the war in Iraq, voter perceptions made a difference in voting. Those giving the negative evaluation strongly supported Obama (64%).

Those who felt their families were better off voted in a similar manner, rewarding the candidate of the party that had held the White House. Of this group, more than four in five (82%) voted for McCain.

The 25% who felt no change broke in the McCain direction by over a two to one margin, 70% to 30%. This group was decisive in giving McCain the win in the county, more than making up for the losses among those who felt their conditions has worsened. These data are shown in the table below.

Table 9. Change in Family Economic Situation and Vote

	<u>Worse off</u>	<u>No change</u>	<u>Better off</u>	<u>TOTAL</u>
Obama:	175 64%	46 30%	34 18%	255
McCain:	98 36%	107 70%	153 82%	358
TOTAL:	273 100%	153 100%	187 100%	613

A rather clear pattern exists in looking at the impact of Bush's job performance, the Iraq War, and perceived changes in the economy that may have affected voters' families. Voters did not choose Obama unless they had a clear reason to reject McCain and the Republicans. When voters had any doubt about performance in any of these issue areas, they chose McCain rather than Obama.

So why did those with mixed evaluations of performance go heavily for McCain? We looked at the party identifications in each of these groups on each question. Most of those who gave mixed answers to these questions about performance were Republicans. When in doubt, they went with their partisan identification. While voters do often base their votes on issues, party loyalty serves as a tie breaker and also colors how people perceive candidates and issues.

Economic Bailout/Rescue Plan

A major topic of discussion in the two months leading up to the election was the fallout of the \$700 billion economic bailout/rescue plan passed by Congress. Because both presidential candidates voted for the plan and actively supported it, feelings about the plan had no significant impact on voting choice.

However, voters nationally and in Aiken County were far more likely to oppose the plan than to support it. Supporters trailed opponents in the county and nationally by roughly twenty percentage points. In Aiken County, 47% opposed the plan compared to 28% who supported it, with 25% having no opinion. Nationally the figures from exit polls indicated that 56% of voters were opposed, 39% were supportive and the remaining 5% had no opinion. The major difference between Aiken County voters and voters nationally was that voters in Aiken County were less likely to have an opinion.

Ideology

Political ideology, which generally refers to the role that people feel government should play, leaned, not surprisingly, in the conservative direction. Of the 90% of the voters who were willing to choose an identification, nearly half (49%) self-identified themselves as conservative. The remaining half split almost evenly between moderates (26%) and liberals (25%).

Compared to voters in the nation as a whole, Aiken County is far more conservative. According to national exit polls, just over a third of all voters in the nation self-identified as conservative (34%) and more than two fifths identify as moderates (44%). So while the nation is predominantly moderate in ideology, Aiken County is predominantly conservative.

Age was related to ideology in the county with voters under 30 being twelve percentage points less conservative than voters over 50 (43% and 55% respectively). Younger voters were also more moderate (by four percentage points) and more liberal (by nine percentage points) than older voters. Yet even among younger voters the largest group was conservative.

Table 10. Age and Political Ideology

<u>IDEOLOG</u>	<u>18-29</u>	<u>AGE</u> <u>30-49</u>	<u>50+</u>	<u>TOTAL</u>
liberal	36 32%	52 24%	65 23%	153 25%
moderate	30 26%	66 31%	61 22%	157 26%
conserv	49 43%	95 45%	155 55%	299 49%
TOTAL	115 100%	213 100%	281 100%	609

Methodology and Participants

The exit poll included voters chosen systematically from ten precincts that represented all areas of the county (the cities of Aiken, North Augusta, the Midland Valley area, and rural areas) and that had 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 11:00. Each voter was handed a two-sided questionnaire on a clipboard, which they filled out themselves and then folded and placed in a "ballot box" to help insure anonymity. An equal number of clipboards were designated as "male" and "female" clipboards so that both genders were equally sampled. After each interview was completed, students approached the next available male or female leaving the polls for the subsequent interview. The response rate was 68%, meaning that about seven of every ten voters approached by students completed the survey. The sampling error for questions answered by all respondents is + or - 4% on questions answered by all respondents.

Dr. Botsch's classes have been performing exit polls since the early 1980s. This year the student/interviewers were Khadijah Abdullah, Corey Adamson, Alex Bush, Michael Foster, Matt Giftos, Jameka Jackson, Kevin Loman, Tamelia Mack, Johnny Maldonado, Lauren Myers, Vanda Siposova, Laura Storey, LaKeshia Thomas, Heath Wheat, Chris Woods, Joey Bramlett, LaTosha Broadwater, Lauren Spence, Courtenay Turner, Priscilla Felder, and Heather Johnson. Christie Hightower, Lyle Todd, and Patrick Long 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.