

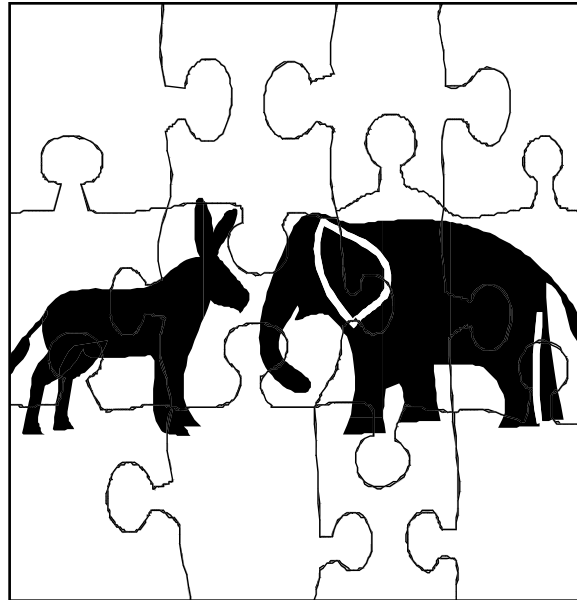
THE 2000 VOTE FOR PRESIDENT

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In the aftermath of a presidential election that essentially ended in a tie, attention has been focused on all sorts of topics that have been ignored in previous years — and that would have been ignored this year were it not for a few thousand votes in one sunny state. For example, the television networks have made mistakes in previous years on their election night calls, hundreds of millions of votes

have been cast on punch card ballots over the last thirty years, a small percentage of ballots have always been undercounted in presidential elections in this country, and ideology has always been an important determinant of judicial decisions. Similarly, all sorts of fundamental currents and divisions within the electorate have been “discovered” and are now hot topics with pundits and analysts. Much of this post-election analysis, however, ignores a key question: why was this election so close?

In other words, much attention has been paid to the consequences of a close election — re-counts, chads, and judicial intervention — but relatively little attention has been paid to what caused the closeness. The very closeness of this election is most certainly its biggest puzzle.



zle. With peace and prosperity in the country, all political science or economic models of the contest predicted a comfortable win for Al Gore. In fact, in early September, a panel of seven political scientists presented their findings at the discipline’s annual meeting in Washington D.C. All seven confidently predicted that Al Gore would win between 53 percent and 60 percent of the two party vote. There

certainly may be some problems with such models, but it is hard to argue with their basic intuition: the political winds were certainly in Gore’s sails. So, what happened?

Using election-day exit polls conducted by the media consortium, Voter News Service (VNS), many observers have pointed to the gender gap, the race gap, the income gap, and the rural/urban gap (just to name a few) as an explanation for why one presidential candidate or the other did not win the presidential race more decisively. “If only George W. Bush had done a couple percentage points better with women or black voters.” “If only Al Gore had done a bit better with men or middle

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income voters.” According to many of these same pundits, the various gender, racial, and class gaps also demonstrate that the United States is a nation characterized by deep political divisions.

To be sure, men and women, blacks and whites, rich and poor, city dwellers and rural inhabitants did have strikingly different voting patterns in the 2000 election. Al Gore won women’s votes by 11 percentage points (54 percent to 43 percent) and George W. Bush took the votes of men by an identical 11-percentage point margin (53 percent to 42 percent). Similarly, white voters went for Bush by 12 percentage points (54 percent to 42 percent), while exactly nine in ten black voters and a little over six in ten Hispanic voters (62 percent) went for Gore. Wealthier voters with household incomes over \$100,000 favored Bush by 11 percentage points (54 percent to 43 percent). Those with incomes under \$30,000 picked Gore by a 15-percentage point margin (55 percent to 40 percent). A little over six in ten voters from urban areas (61 percent) voted for Gore, while just a little fewer than six in ten rural voters (59 percent) went for Bush.

Although 2000 evinced the largest gender gap on record, such differences have been part of the electoral landscape for the past 20 years. In 1996, for example, there was a 16-percentage point gender gap, and while winning a landslide victory, Bill Clinton lost to Bob Dole among male voters. Moreover, one must be careful when looking at bivariate relationships. For instance, amongst women there were significant differences in voting patterns. White women split evenly between Gore and Bush, while non-white women supported Gore by 60 percentage points. Working women favored Gore by 19 percentage points while women who did not work outside the home favored Bush by eight percentage points. Finally, working mothers favored Gore by 22 percentage points, while at-home moms favored Bush by 24 percentage points. All in all, women in the electorate were more likely to have lower levels of education and lower levels of income —

two factors that were also highly correlated with a Democratic vote.

More generally, this last example underscores the point that divisions among demographic groups may really speak to the enduring characteristics of each of the party’s core voters or partisans. Decades of research have shown that party identification is the single most stable and powerful predictor of political attitudes and voting behavior. Put in its most simple form, Democrats almost always win the votes of Democratic identifiers, who are more likely to be women, minorities, union voters, the less affluent, and city dwellers. Republicans almost always win the votes of Republican identifiers, who are more likely to be men, whites, the affluent, and small town or rural residents. The turnout rates as well as the loyalty of partisans and the votes of independent swing voters decide presidential elections. In the 2000 contest, Gore won the votes of 86 percent of Democrats and Bush won the votes of 91 percent of Republicans.

The bottom line is that there is little new in “gap” analysis, and such a focus obscures fundamental truths about the nature of the American electorate and what factors drove this election. In short, when it comes to the voting patterns of particular groups in the 2000 election, the story was really just more of the same. There were — as there have always been — real differences in the voting patterns of those with strong party attachments.

Putting these gaps in perspective also suggests that the existence of such group divisions in the electorate does not necessarily translate into a divided nation. With their most loyal voters secure, both candidates spent most of the campaign aiming their messages at swing voters in the center of the ideological spectrum: suburban voters who comprised 48 percent of the electorate, independents who comprised 27 percent of the electorate, and self-described middle class voters who comprised 49 percent of the electorate. There were certainly some heated moments during and after the campaign. Predictably, the Democrats

attempted to convince voters that Bush was not up to the job and would destroy the Social Security system with risky tax cuts for the upper class. Equally as a predictable, Republicans tried to convince voters that Gore could not be trusted and would squander the entire federal budget surplus with new spending programs. All in all, though, with their bases secure, both candidates minimized ideological differences and the campaign was not particularly divisive. The Bush campaign displayed racial diversity at their convention and promised that they would save Social Security, provide prescription drug benefits, and focus on education. The Gore campaign talked about fiscal responsibility and pressuring the entertainment industry to reduce the amount of sex and violence in its movies.

With only a slight Democratic advantage in party identification (39 percent to 35 percent for the Republicans) and loyal partisan voters on both sides, mathematically what made this election so close was the fact that the swing voters did not swing. Independents divided 47 percent for Bush to 45 percent for Gore. Self-defined “middle-class” voters went 49 percent for Bush and 48 percent for Gore. Suburbanites split 49 percent for Bush and 47 percent for Gore. The real puzzle then is why the swing vote did not swing.

Presidential elections are referendums on the incumbent. Even though Americans may know little about the exact policies of the two parties, they do know whether times are good or bad and vote accordingly. Prominent among the short-term factors that influence a voter’s sense of the times and assessments of the incumbent administration — and consequently the loyalty of partisans and the direction of independents — is public perception of the state of the economy. When the economy is

strong, the public is likely to have a favorable view of the incumbent administration. Swing voters are most influenced by such short-term factors.

Some strategic decisions of the Bush campaign can — and certainly will be — second-guessed. Most prominent among these decisions was the decision to contest California.

Throughout the fall, the Bush campaign made modest buys in some of the state’s less expensive media markets, Fresno, Sacramento, and San Diego. In later October, however, the campaign poured millions of dollars into buys in the pricey Los Angeles and San Francisco markets. Overall, the Bush campaign and the Republican National Committee (RNC) spent over 14 million dollars on television advertising in the state. Not only did Bush not even come close in the state — losing by 12 percentage points — but his spending there failed to shake Gore from his strategy; the Gore campaign did not divert any resources for television advertising into the Golden State.

Some Republican strategists argue that the campaign was already covering at saturation levels all the other important markets. Although that is true enough, perhaps money could have been used for other purposes. Also, even if the money could not have been placed in other markets or used for purposes other than television late in the campaign, perhaps it could have been used in August or September. Remember Al Gore’s August? From choosing Joe Lieberman to kissing his wife before a well-received convention speech, Gore received extremely positive coverage in August and early September and took a solid lead over Governor Bush. While there was little that the Bush campaign could have done about all this free media coverage, the Democratic National

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Committee (DNC) also outspent the RNC by over ten million dollars (\$35 million to \$25 million) over the course of the summer. This highly aggregated number, however, masked a more significant story. According to data I gathered on the television air war during the month of August, in the top markets in the major swing states (Detroit, Flint, Grand Rapids, Columbus, Cleveland, Toledo, Cincinnati, Wilkes Barre, Pittsburgh, Philadelphia) the DNC had a three to two or two to one advantage in spots aired over the RNC. Although, the RNC and Bush campaign made massive buys in the last weeks of the election to close these gaps and the Bush campaign was able to regain momentum by the end of September, Gore's August bounce structured the early part of the race.

Given how close the race ended up, and contrary to some of the snap polling conducted in its aftermath, it seems plausible that the release of Governor Bush's drunk driving arrest did have an impact on the race. In most national polls, Bush seemed to be gaining ground and had a three or four percentage point lead. As we all know, the race ended up even and exit polls suggest that many late deciders went for Gore. Although we will probably never have the data to know for certain that it was the drunk driving arrest that stopped Bush's momentum and caused late deciders to go for Gore, I think it has to be part of the story. It is very unusual for undecided voters to break toward an incumbent (which Gore essentially was) in the last days of campaign. Most political consultants playing Monday morning quarterback argue that the Bush campaign should have released this information on its own at a much earlier point in the campaign.

Still, whatever mistakes the Bush campaign may have made, it is the Gore campaign that has more to explain. With the wind at their back in the form of a strong economy at home, relative peace and security abroad, and an opponent with little national political or policy experience, their man was not able to win swing voters in a relatively decisive fashion. Gore's inability to take full advantage of

the economy is shown by the following example. In 1996, one in three Americans thought that their family's economic situation was better than compared to four years prior. Bill Clinton won these voters by over 40 percentage points. In the 2000 contest, even more voters thought that they were better off than they were four years ago (50 percent). Yet, Al Gore only won their votes by 25 percentage points in 2000.

The data are not in hand to determine definitively why Al Gore did not perform better. Still, some speculation is in order. Gore certainly did not have the charisma or political skills of a Bill Clinton. Gore's awkward and often arrogant performances on the campaign trail and in the debates stand in contrast to not only Clinton but to Gore's own performance in his concession speech. As I write this essay, a few days after the final Supreme Court decision and the concession speech, a number of Democratic consultants have bemoaned to me the fact that the "concession speech" Gore was not visible during the campaign.

Ralph Nader clearly hurt the Vice-President's chances. Most analysis has focused on parsing up Nader's 2.7 percent of the national vote. Although we cannot know for sure, it seems reasonable to claim that while a significant number of Nader voters may not have voted or might have voted for another fringe candidate, more of Nader supporters clearly would have voted for Gore. So, with Nader out of the race, Gore would have enjoyed a slightly larger win in the overall popular vote. It is, of course, the states that matter and Gore eventually won the states where it seemed that Nader's presence provided the greatest challenge: Minnesota, Washington, Oregon, New Mexico, and Wisconsin. Of course, given the closeness of this race and the fact that even a few hundred Nader votes in Florida or a few thousand votes in New Hampshire cost Gore the presidency, one may need to go no further than this basic analysis to show that Nader's presence mattered.

Still, Nader's real effect may have been more indirect. Nader's presence forced the

Gore campaign to alter both its message and the targeting of campaign resources. In other words, while Gore ended up winning states like Wisconsin and Minnesota, the Gore campaign had to head to the left with a populist message to secure its base. Such a message did not resonate as well with swing voters. Furthermore, the more populist message, described by one wry observer as “we’re rich as hell and we’re not going to take it,” made it difficult for Gore to embrace the strong economy as much as he needed to — and as most election models assumed he would.

Nader provided tactical or targeting challenges as well to the Gore campaign. Gore and his interest group allies on the Democratic left had to spend money in states that should have been safely in the Democratic column. For example, an analysis I did on television advertising expenditures during the 2000 campaign showed that Gore and his party and interest group allies spent close to four million dollars in Milwaukee and Green Bay alone. When expenditures in Madison and other markets are added in, and the cost of an extensive field operation is included, Democratic expenditures in Wisconsin certainly approached six million dollars. Gore ended up with a narrow victory in the state, but with Nader out of the race many of these resources could have been targeted in other states.

There was also, of course, the Clinton factor with there being significant divisions

among voters in their attitudes toward Clinton as president and as a person. Although 55 percent of voters approved of the job that Clinton was doing as president, over one in three of these very same voters (20 percent of all voters) thought little of Clinton as a person. While these voters still went for Gore by 30 percentage points, voters with a positive view of Clinton’s job performance and the state of the economy should have been an even greater source of Gore votes.

Of course, in an election that was this close, just about anything could plausibly be argued to have made the difference: the turnout of partisans, the existence of various gaps, the advertising and travel decisions of campaigns, and the airing of Governor Bush’s drunk driving conviction days before the election. The presidential election proved a virtual tie because of the close balance in terms of core party identification and loyal partisan voters on both the Democratic and Republican side and the fact that swing voters split almost equally for Gore and Bush. The vice-president failed to fully capitalize from the favorable campaign environment (especially the strong economy) because of the leftward shift in strategy which his campaign adopted in response to Nader’s candidacy; his relative lack of political skills; and the electorate’s divided opinion of Clinton.