

Political scientists examine the largest voting gaps in America

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Recent studies of the 2004 election data by political scientists assess the role and impact of major sets of differences in the voting behavior of Americans--known in popular parlance as "voting gaps." Based on differences in support for George W. Bush and ranked in descending order, the studies confirm the largest voting gaps in the electorate were race and ethnicity, religion, class, region, gender, age, and education.

The research is presented in a symposium entitled "Gapology and the Presidential Vote," edited by Laura R. Olson (Clemson University) and John C. Green (University of Akron). In four articles, scholars explore a different voter gap in detail. The entire symposium appears in the July issue of PS: Political Science & Politics, a journal of the American Political Science Association (APSA), and is available online at www.apsanet.org/section_694.cfm .

"We aim to show that 21st-century Americans are divided on a wide range of political fronts that go far beyond the ... 'red state, blue state' rubric that has become so popular," state the editors; "reality ... is far more complex."

The religion gap was one of the most significant recent trends among voters. In their article, Olson and Green reflect on the tendency of the most religious Americans to espouse conservative political beliefs and support the GOP. Their analysis finds there was "no sustained 'religion gap' in voting behavior until 1992," after which "differences within religious communities were ... apparently more politically significant

than differences among religious traditions." The 2004 voting data reveal a significant gap where "one-half of all Bush's ballots were cast by weekly worship attendees, whereas some two-thirds of Kerry's votes were cast by less-than-weekly attendees." However, the authors argue for a nuanced interpretation of the data given that 41.2% of weekly worship attendees claim they have a moderate political ideology and nearly as many chose economic issues as their top policy concern (34.3%) as did moral issues (34.4%).

The impact of class divisions on American politics has seemed in decline since the 1970s but Jeffrey M. Stonecash (Syracuse University) observes this "may well have reflected a combination of conditions that subsequently have changed" and that class divisions "are likely to be greater when inequality is growing and when the parties differ on policy alternatives." Notably, both economic inequality and party differences have increased in recent years. In 2004 the class gap--measured primarily by income--was the third most substantial voting gap at 12.3%. Voters with incomes over \$50,000 voted 57% for Bush while 55% of those earning less than \$50,000 voted for Kerry. Voters earning between \$30--\$50,000 broke evenly. In 2004, voting choices were closely linked to the Iraq War and President Bush's polarizing effect, arguably leading to a recorded decrease in the impact of class divisions among voters. "After these short-term factors fade from the scene," notes Stonecash, "divisions revolving around class are likely ... to become more salient." Still, he concludes it is unlikely "class issues will be central to the 2006 elections."

Karen M. Kaufman (University of Maryland, College Park) notes that the gender gap in 2004 stood at a 12-year low, leading to claims that 9/11 and Iraq have caused "uncharacteristic unity between the genders." The data, she states, suggest otherwise: on Bush, Iraq, and security, "consistent male-female differences emerge." Moreover, mothers with children at home were no more likely to vote for Bush in 2004 (49%)

than in 2000 (50%), debunking the widespread "security mom" theory. The more important story of the 2004 election, according to Kaufman, was a regional one where "Southern White women moved to the Republican Party ... in much higher proportions than in the recent past." The presidential gender gap in the South was 11% in 2000 and only 5% in 2004--the lowest in 40 years. Kaufman traces the findings to variations in candidate trait evaluations by Southern women, including whether a candidate "cares about people like me"; is a "strong leader"; and "is moral." She concludes by observing that the circumstances of 2004 could be anomalous and "to the extent that the salience of military concerns wanes over time ... the gender gap in the South may rise again."

The final article, "The Rural Side of the Urban-Rural Gap," by James G. Gimpel and Kimberly A. Karnes (both at the University of Maryland, College Park), examines the urban-rural gap. The authors note that "the 'red' vs. 'blue' Election Night maps really mask an urban-rural divide within states," and the 2004 election data "indicate a 20-point gap...between inhabitants of counties with more than a million people and those in...counties of less than 25,000." They focus on the unheralded traits of rural voters, pointing to three explanations of rural political distinctiveness that favor the GOP. First, "Republican voting habits may be sustained ... because it is not so evident to [rural] residents that economic conditions have worsened dramatically under Republican leadership." Second, studies "show that people who live in rural areas are more satisfied with their lives and jobs." Third, "this ... appears to be anchored in self-employment or an enlarged scope of job responsibility" tied closely to an entrepreneurial self-image and widespread property ownership. "Rural Republican voters are not daft," conclude Gimpel and Karnes. "The Democrats are not an attractive party for rural Americans ... because many ... doubt whether typical Democratic economic positions fit with what they believe is true about themselves and the world."

The authors agree there is more to be known about voting gaps and the links among them, particularly as they might affect the 2006 elections. Moreover, as their research persuasively concludes, the red state-blue state delineation's only appeal is simplicity. But simplicity should not be sufficient for readers who are truly interested in understanding what will likely separate voters as they approach the 2006 mid-term elections.

Source: American Political Science Association

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