

Guest Analysis

The 2000 Presidential Election in the Many Souths of North Carolina

John Heppen

Department of Geography
Carthage College

While the nation's attention was riveted on Florida in the closest presidential election in history, North Carolina underscored the reality of Southern political geography. For the sixth time since 1976 the Republican Party carried the electoral votes of North Carolina. George W. Bush received 56 percent of the vote, whereas Al Gore garnered 43 percent (Ralph Nader was not on the ballot in the Tar Heel State). Bush won throughout the South and took the border states of West Virginia, Kentucky, and Missouri away from the Democrats and redeemed Arkansas, Louisiana, and Tennessee for the Grand Old Party (Figure 1). Tennessee proved especially heartbreaking for Gore, since it would have made Florida irrelevant. Florida, North Carolina, and the Greater South formed the bedrock of George W. Bush's electoral college strategy. Gore actively contested only the Southern states of Florida, Tennessee, and Arkansas and ceded North Carolina to Bush.

North Carolina, a microcosm of the South, is a geographically diverse state within the Southern context. The eastern Coastal Plain is part of the Deep South and houses substantial rural black populations with a history of white minority control. These counties constituted the heart of the Solid South and yellow-dog Democratic support among white voters. The Blue Ridge represents the Mountain South and its white Upland South culture. These counties have been Republican since the Civil War. Family farmers living in the area had no use for slaves on their small and hilly plots and have supported the GOP at local, state, and national levels since Reconstruction. The Piedmont consists of the urban/suburban South (Charlotte, Winston-Salem, and Greensboro), the rural hinterland, and the high-technology Sunbelt South

(the Triangle of Raleigh, Durham, and Chapel Hill). The Piedmont is also home to black populations in urban areas and is increasingly attracting migrants from outside the South and the United States to its fast-growth cities. Republican success in North Carolina has been built on the votes of Mountain Republicans in the Blue Ridge and white voters in the Piedmont with some white support from the Coastal Plain. Democrats rely on black voters, remaining yellow-dog Democrats, and white moderates and liberals in the cities of the Piedmont.

A look at the Republican vote by county shows areas of Republican support in the Blue Ridge and the Piedmont (Figure 2). Bush received heavy support in the traditional mountain base of Cherokee, Clay, and Polk Counties. But, these counties are relatively small when compared to the larger urban/suburban Piedmont. The urban/suburban Piedmont and its rural hinterland provided George W. Bush with his winning statewide margin. Bush won a majority of the vote in the more populated Counties of Wake, Forsythe, Alamance, and Guilford. But, Bush's urban support was not uniform throughout the Piedmont. In Charlotte's Mecklenberg County, his margin was only 51 percent. Orange County, which is home to Chapel Hill, supported Gore handily as did Durham County, home to Duke. Areas of higher Democratic support included the northern and Southern edges of the Coastal Plain. Many of these counties represent North Carolina's rural black-belt. Robeson County's population is approximately 25 percent black and Gore won the county easily. Likewise, Edgecombe County in the northeastern portion of the Coastal Plain is over half African-American and supported Gore by a large margin. But as in the mountains most

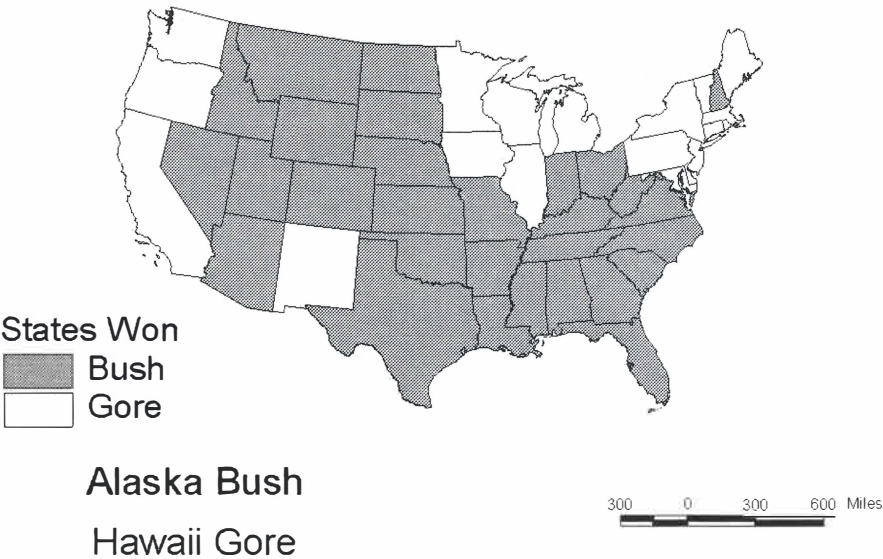


Figure 1. The 2000 Election

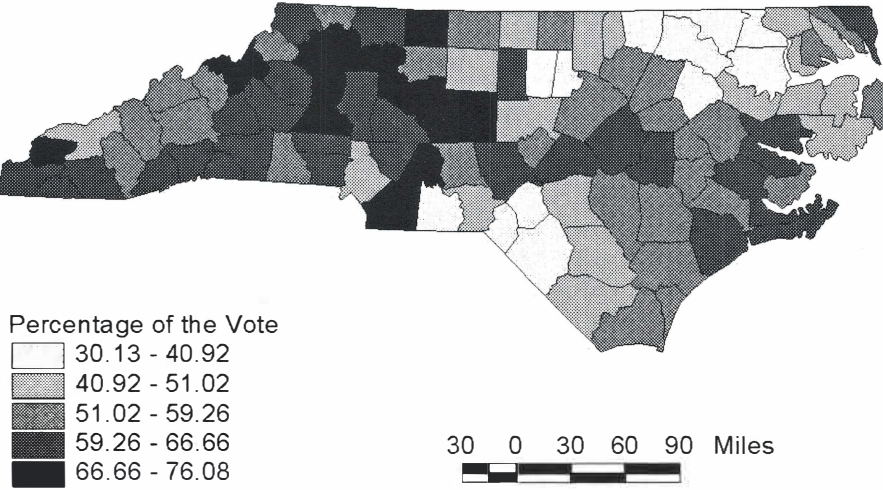


Figure 2. The George W. Bush Vote in North Carolina by County

of the counties of the Coastal Plain are not heavily populated and the urban/suburban Piedmont remains the key to taking the state. The GOP has had an advantage among white voters in that portion of the state since the 1960s.

But, the presence of loyal African-American voters and islands of Democratic strength in Orange and Durham Counties still makes the state competitive for Democrats. Democrat Mike Easley was elected governor while George W. Bush carried the state and Democrat John Edwards was previously elected to the Senate. They won based on a coalition similar to those built by former Democratic Governor Jim Hunt. A coalition based on blacks and white liberals led by a moderate, white Democrat can receive just enough white votes from the Piedmont and the Coastal Plain to carry the state. In the final analysis, both parties need a formula which includes the urban Piedmont, and future elections in the state will be dominated by appeals to these voters. North Carolina's political geography dictates that both parties must appeal to more than just one South.