

Country vs. city, spelled in red, blue

Election map shows traditional demographic divide still strong

By Jill Lawrence
USA TODAY

The map tells the story. Vast stretches of red across the rural heartland, all Republican George W. Bush country. A coastal perimeter and urban patches of blue, where Democrat Al Gore prevailed.

Geography is perhaps the most striking yardstick by which to measure the gulf between those who voted for Bush and those who voted for Gore. The election results might be inconclusive as to who won the presidency, but they are clear when it comes to who was won over by the presidential candidates.

The two major parties continue to live up to their stereotypical, polarized images: Democrats as a home for women, minorities, gays, immigrants and city dwellers; Republicans as the favorite for men, religious and rural Americans, gun owners and moralists.

"The fires of 1968 have been banked, but the embers are still glowing," says Fred Siegel, an urban expert at the Progressive Policy Institute. "That's what these divisions are. They are still visible, still marking our boundaries."

Big-city voters handed Gore a 71% to 25% landslide, while six in 10 rural and small-town voters backed Bush. The suburbs, split evenly between the two parties, continue to be the pivotal battlegrounds in national elections.

Can Democrats survive as a bicoastal urban party? Can Republicans survive without making inroads into major population centers? Is the country fundamentally split, reacting in a transitory way to the Clinton years or indulging in the choices made possible by peaceful, prosperous times?

A USA TODAY analysis suggests that Democrats have a more urgent survival question. Gore won only a quarter as many counties as Bush. And population growth in Gore Country over the past decade has been 5%, compared with 14% for counties in Bush Country. Immigrants have been flooding cities, but natives are moving out in pursuit of jobs, space and better housing.

Republicans won the West, the South and much of the Midwest. The Democrats won the Northeast, the West Coast and several Midwest industrial states. In this election, that was enough for Gore to be leading Wednesday in the popular vote. He did it by piling up large pluralities in big, coastal states: California by 1.2 million votes, New York by 1.5 million, New Jersey by 400,000. He also split the suburbs with Bush — a new development for Democrats, who routinely lost the suburbs during the 1980s.

Cities are by nature more liberal than suburban and rural areas, Siegel says, because they are denser and people rely more on public services and regulation such as zoning. "You have a different attitude toward politics," he says. "You can do less on your own. You need more from government."

The diversity of cities also breeds more diversity, along with a live-and-let-live mindset that is a lure for young people, singles, minorities, gays, immigrants and artists, most of whom supported Gore.

More and more, analysts say, rural, less affluent voters feel government is stepping on their religious beliefs and out of step with their views on crime, abortion and guns. By contrast, more affluent, urban voters are increasingly defined by tolerance, "progressive" cultural views and a fear that Christian conservatives want to impose their views on everyone.

The culture gap

The cultural differences between Gore's voters and Bush's, as illuminated by exit polls, were striking. Bush attracted people who go to church more than once a week, who think it's more important that the president be a moral leader than a good government manager, who oppose stricter gun laws and who believe that if a school is failing, the government should pay for private school. Honesty is the quality they value most in a leader, followed by leadership and likability.

Gore drew heavy majorities of gay and Jewish voters, those who rarely or never attend church, who support stricter gun laws and who say a school should be fixed if it is failing. Their paramount value is experience, followed by competence to handle complex issues and caring about "people like me."

In a sense, Bush exploited the cultural polarization by making the election a referendum on character. But in another way, he tried to bridge many of the differences. He rarely mentioned abortion, gays or guns. Instead, he focused on education, health and "compassionate conservatism." His photo ops almost invariably involved black or Hispanic children. And yet nine in 10 blacks still voted for Gore.

Bill Clinton and the question of character shadowed the election, to Bush's benefit. More than two-thirds of the electorate said Clinton would be remembered not for his leadership but for his scandals. Nearly half — 44% — said the scandal was very or somewhat important in determining their vote, and three-quarters of them voted for Bush.

Gore did well with voters at the low and high ends of the income scale, and they voted by and large on issues. The labor vote was instructive: Union members went 63% to 32% for Gore, according to an AFL-CIO survey Tuesday of 815 members who voted. About a quarter said personal character and values was the

Continued on 21A ▶

Election contest: Country vs. city

Continued from 19A

most important factor in their vote; 62% said issue positions.

Not surprisingly, union members had economic matters on their minds. Asked the top two issues in their presidential vote, 37% cited Social Security, 33% mentioned the economy and jobs, 33% said health care and prescription drugs, and 25% mentioned education.

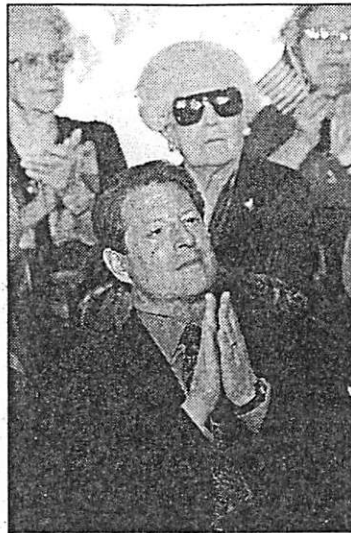
Only 17% in the union survey said taxes figured as one of their top two issues. Exit polls Tuesday showed just how important that issue was for Bush, who ran on a promise to cut taxes \$1.3 trillion over 10 years. Of those who considered taxes the No. 1 issue in the election, 79% were Bush voters. Of those who said cutting taxes should be the new president's first priority, 70% were Bush voters.

Venus and Mars

The previous presidential election provoked speculation about the "feminization" of the Democratic Party. Commentator Chris Matthews' observed that the Democrats were the "mommy" party and the Republicans were the "daddy" party.

Gore's positions this year were tailor-made for women who are more likely than their husbands to be caregivers of the young or old and who research shows are more likely to believe that their families may someday need the government safety net.

While Bush promoted "personal responsibility," market-oriented prescription drug coverage and partial private investment of Social Security funds, Gore stressed the

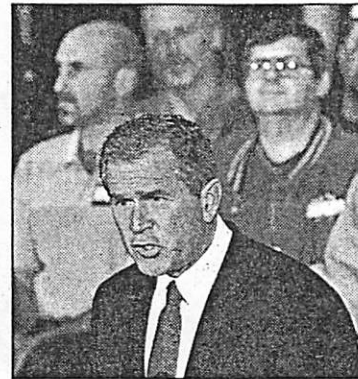


By Doug Mills, AP

Gore: At a rally at a community center in Philadelphia in April.

government's role as a safety net, backed drug coverage under Medicare and vowed to protect the traditional Social Security program. He also had a package of tax cuts aimed at pinpoint targets, such as child care, college tuition and long-term care for the elderly. The benefits were modest at best, but they gave Gore talking points that allowed him to demonstrate his empathy with average families facing such costs.

The payoff: Gore won women's votes, 54% to 42%, while Bush easily carried men, 52% to 43%. The candidates' combined gender gap of 21 percentage points was a record. "If men alone had voted, Bush would have won the presidency hands-down," says Patricia Ireland, president of the National Organization for Women.



By Eric Gay, AP

Bush: During a campaign stop in Fraser, Mich., last month.

Yet when men and women are grouped by other defining characteristics, such as race and work status, the gender gap closes sharply. For example, Bush narrowly carried white women, 49% to 48%, and women who don't work outside the home, 52% to 44%.

That suggests that geography remains the primary divide between Bush and Gore. Men and women in the less-populated hinterland tend to be more conservative, and thus more inclined to back Bush's stances in favor of gun rights and capital punishment. Conversely, urban dwellers of both sexes are attracted to Gore's more liberal positions.

"Compassionate conservative" Bush and erstwhile "New Democrat" Gore tried broader appeals to change the color code of the presidential map. But ultimately, both wound up winning little more than their traditional political turfs.

Contributing: Paul Overberg and Richard Benedetto