

***THE BLUE STATES AND THE RED STATES: SCOUTING THE
ELECTORAL MAP AT THE OUTSET OF THE 2004
PRESIDENTIAL CAMPAIGN***

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In 1960 Republican Presidential candidate Richard Nixon foolishly pledged to campaign in all fifty states. That meant that he would spend time and resources in states he had no chance of winning (like Massachusetts, home of his Democratic opponent John Kennedy) as well as in states he had no chance of losing (like Nebraska, long a Republican bastion). Candidates and campaigns have gotten much smarter since then about allocating resources and candidate time. Candidates now divert time and money away from states they seem sure either to win or lose, ignoring some states altogether. Instead, they concentrate on those closely contested toss-up states, making repeated visits and spending heavily in these states on which the outcome of the election will turn. Candidates and their managers scour the electoral map and assess their chances, strategizing to seek the magic mix of states whose combined electoral votes add up to at least the 270 needed to elect the president. As all Americans were reminded in the 2000 election the presidency goes to the candidate with a majority of electoral votes, not to the one who captures the most popular votes.

As the 2004 presidential election looms, both the Democratic and Republican campaigns are undertaking this process, dividing the fifty states into three categories: “our” states, “their” states, and the battleground states. They will defend their base states, selectively raid their opponent’s base states, and make decisions about allocating candidate time and resources in the handful of significant and closely contested battleground states where either side could win.

This essay's title is taken from the well-known and often invoked classification of the nation's divided electoral vote in the 2000 election. The "red" states are those primarily southern, western, and Great Plains states—many with small populations—which voted, some overwhelmingly, for George W. Bush in 2000. These "red" states are flanked by the "blue" states, those in the northeast, on both coasts, and in the Great Lakes region—many of them very populous—which voted, some overwhelmingly, for Al Gore in the last election. Commentators sometimes write or speak of the blue and the red states not only as if they were separate countries, but also as if they were part of permanently divided, diametrically opposed coalitions. This is only partially correct. While the blue states have been consistently Democratic in recent presidential elections, not all of the red states have always been red. In fact, some these red states were colored blue in the 1992 and 1996 presidential elections. What this suggests is that some states, far from being the permanent preserve of either the red or the blue, have highly volatile electorates capable of swinging these states into either major party's coalition as has happened in recent elections. One of the many questions going into the 2004 presidential election—to be explored at length below—is whether those competitive states which were red in 2000 will remain so in 2004 or will revert to their blue state status of the 1990s. It is on such questions that the outcome of the 2004 contest will hinge.

Thinking of the nation as a division of red and blue states may offer some clarity but it also oversimplifies. Since not all red states are equally "red," and because not all blue states are equally "blue," such a classification is reductive and does not present a nuanced understanding of the electoral maps on the walls-- as well as in the minds-- of strategists for both parties. This essay offers a more refined way of thinking about the breakdown of the blue state and the red states heading into the 2004 campaign. It suggests which states can be safely conceded to

the Democrats and which to the Republicans. And it offers a further categorization and analysis of the battleground or swing states where both parties will concentrate their efforts, knowing that they hold the key to victory. In short, the essay suggests a framework through which interested observers might follow the upcoming campaign in a knowing way which matches the way the campaigns themselves are thinking.

Several caveats. No one can know the result of the 2004 election now and this paper makes no predictions about the outcome. This is a historical consideration, not a predictive one. As a historian I do not, as a political scientist might, offer a model for forecasting the outcome of the election. Nor do I attempt to analyze how certain issues—the war on terror, the war in Iraq, the budget deficit, the economy—will effect the election. All of those things remain to be seen and cannot be predicted this far out from the election. Instead, what I do in this essay is to examine recent voting patterns and histories to determine which way the various states are likely to be leaning at the outset of the campaign regardless of who the parties select as their nominees in 2004. Thus, while we cannot yet know how the campaign will end, we do know—by carefully studying these recent election returns and understanding how those results create the historical context in which the 2004 election will exist-- how and where it will begin. Not every state is truly competitive in 2004, not every state will start from a blank slate in considering candidates. Some states are inclined historically to lean to the left or the right, to Democrats or to Republicans, to the “blue” or to the “red.” Since, as noted, candidates will not campaign everywhere and because each candidate will concede some states to the other side, each campaign will begin by dividing the country into categories of states; this division—made by both campaigns-- will then drive decisions about the allocation of candidates, money, and advertising. But those very decisions about which states are “ours,” “theirs,” and up for grabs are

determined by recent voting patterns. This essay, then, offers a perspective on what the political roadmap looks like at the outset of Campaign 2004 based on a historical reading of the recent past.

I have divided the fifty states into three categories: the Democratic base states, the Republican base states, and the battleground states which are themselves divided into three separate sub-categories. A party's base states are those which, excepting unusual circumstances, vote reliably for that party regardless of who the nominees are for either party. In other words, both parties have base states that they can count on and so they often devote few resources to these states, knowing that it would be a waste since they will carry the state anyway (think Nixon in Nebraska in 1960).

There is little permanent, however, about the composition of party bases. While it is just as true today as it was in 1960 that a Democrat will have a hard time winning Nebraska and a Republican will have a hard time winning in Massachusetts, many states have moved from one party base to another over recent years. The Solid South was once solidly Democratic; now it is pretty solidly Republican at the presidential level. Up until the 1990s California was part of the Republican base; now it belongs solidly to the Democratic camp. Because of these transformations, campaigns often target states in the other side's base hoping to win them over. Sometimes they succeed. Over time, this creates a re-drawing of the electoral map to accommodate the shifting party bases. Here are the electoral divisions heading into the 2004 campaign:

The Democratic Base States (14 states plus District of Columbia for 217 electoral votes)

These states are the ones most reliably Democratic in presidential elections. The states in this category meet two qualifications: they voted Democratic in each of the last three presidential elections (1992, 1996, 2000) AND they cast a majority vote (50% or more) for the Democratic nominee in 2000. Fourteen states plus the District of Columbia fall into this category:

- California (55 electoral votes in 2004)
- Connecticut (7)
- Delaware (3)
- District of Columbia (3)
- Hawaii (4)
- Illinois (21)
- Maryland (10)
- Massachusetts (12)
- Michigan (17)
- New Jersey (15)
- New York (31)
- Pennsylvania (21)
- Rhode Island (4)
- Vermont (3)
- Washington (11)

The Democratic base states (the “blue” states in popular parlance) are generally more populous and therefore cast more electoral votes than the Republican base states. The Democrats’ base contains five of the country’s eight largest states. But these states will cast a net difference of six fewer electoral votes in 2000 due to population loss and reapportionment. Of the states in this category only California gained an electoral vote. By contrast, New York and Pennsylvania lost two votes each while Illinois, Michigan, and Connecticut lost one apiece. Thus, the Democratic base states, while still representing a sizable block of

electoral votes, will cast a proportionally lower percentage of votes in 2004 (and 2008) than they did in the 1990s or in 2000.

The Republican Base states (16 states for 135 electoral votes)

The Republican base states (the “red” states) are defined by the same criteria as the Democratic base: they are the states which voted for Republicans in each of the last three elections (1992, 1996, 2000) AND which gave a majority vote (50%) or greater to the Republican nominee in 2000.

Alabama (9 electoral votes in 2004)
 Alaska (3)
 Idaho (4)
 Indiana (11)
 Kansas (6)
 Mississippi (6)
 Nebraska (5)
 North Carolina (15)
 North Dakota (3)
 Oklahoma (7)
 South Carolina (8)
 South Dakota (3)
 Texas (34)
 Utah (5)
 Virginia (13)
 Wyoming (3)

The Republican presidential base contains more states than the Democratic base (16 states to 14 states) but significantly fewer electoral votes: only 135 compared to the 217 of the Democratic base. While these states are mostly small—seven of the sixteen have five or fewer electoral votes—they are overwhelmingly Republican, returning huge margins to the party’s nominee. Few of these states are

ever seriously contested by the Democrats, partly because of their small size and partly because of the likely futility of such efforts. There was no net change in electoral votes cast by these states due to reapportionment: Texas gained two seats and North Carolina one which offset losses of one seat each in Indiana, Oklahoma, and Mississippi.

The Battleground States (20 states for 186 electoral votes)

These are the states where the 2004 election will be decided—and they fit neatly into neither party’s base. All but six of these twenty states have voted for both parties in the past three elections. Put another way, fourteen of the states in this category have been carried at least once by each party since 1992 and figure to be fiercely contested in 2004. Since the election outcome will be determined in these states they are likely to see great expenditures of candidate time and advertising dollars by both sides.

But—and this is a point obscured by the simplistic “red state-blue state” dichotomy-- the twenty battleground states are not uniform. The dynamics of recent elections results suggest that these states may be subdivided even further. I split them into three distinct categories: Clinton-Gore states, Clinton-Bush states, and Split Vote-Bush states.

A. Clinton-Gore states (6 states for 43 electoral votes)

Iowa (7 electoral votes)

Maine (4)

Minnesota (10)

New Mexico (5)

Oregon (7)

Wisconsin (10)

The Clinton-Gore states are so-named because they have voted Democratic in each of the past three elections, twice for Clinton and once for Gore. However, they gave only a plurality of their votes to Gore instead of a majority which prevents them from being listed with the Democratic base although they have voted with the base states since 1992. Although Gore carried these states in 2000 he did so by very narrow margins and the Democrats saw some of their largest declines in voting percentages in these six states. As Republicans look ahead to 2004 they are likely to target these states very heavily, hoping with additional effort to carry these states they narrowly lost in 2000. Likewise, Democrats know that these states represent their best chance to move beyond their base of 217 electoral votes and closer to the magic number of 270 needed to elect. If Democrats carry all of these states again in 2004 and also carry all of their base states they would have 260 electoral votes, putting them within one or two additional states of getting to 270. For both parties, then, these states are crucial and will see intense campaigning by both sides—Democrats to consolidate their past gains and return these states to their base; Republicans to try for a takeaway.

There are several additional interesting features that the Clinton-Gore states have in common which partially explain their current political standing. In each of these states Ross Perot received a strong percentage in 1992 and/or 1996. And, in each of these states except Iowa, Ralph Nader polled 4% or better in 2000. Thus, a recent tendency in these states to give third-party candidates strong support resulted in a volatile electorate. In the decisive Clinton victories of 1992 and 1996 the third party vote seemingly made little difference in the outcome although Perot probably took more votes from the Republicans than from the Democrats. In 2000

a high Nader vote likely cut substantially into Gore's margins and produced a close vote even as the combined anti-Bush vote (Gore votes plus Nader votes) in these six states would have given Gore margins approaching Clinton's. Absent a strong third-party presence on the left in 2004 these states might move back into the Democratic base.

These states might also have predictive power. If the Democrats can hold these six they stand a good chance of winning the 2004 election. If, on the other hand, some or all of them move into the Republican column, these defections will cost the Democrats' their best opportunities to add states to their base. Losses here for the Democrats could predict losses in the other battleground states since these six states are the party's strongest in the battleground category.

B. Clinton-Bush states

- Arkansas (6 electoral votes)
- Kentucky (8)
- Louisiana (9)
- Missouri (11)
- Nevada (5)
- New Hampshire (4)
- Ohio (20)
- Tennessee (11)
- West Virginia (5)

This second category of battleground states (79 electoral votes in 2004) consists of those states which voted twice for Clinton but then reversed course and in 2000 voted for Bush. These states had been part of the Democratic base but were peeled away in the last election. It was in these states—including his own Tennessee—that Al Gore received his biggest rebuke and ultimately where the Democrats lost the election. Had Gore won only one— any single one—of these

states he would have been elected President regardless of the outcome in Florida. Most of these states are the border south states where southern Democrats (Jimmy Carter, Bill Clinton) often do very well and where arguably Gore should have fared better. But these are also states which had generally trended Republican before the 1990s which means that the 2000 results in these contested states may suggest a return to pre-Clinton form. These nine states should be competitive and within reach of both parties and will see intensive campaigning. Republicans will be trying to solidify their hold on these states and move them out of the old Democratic base and into a new Republican base. Democrats will try to reclaim in 2004 these states which they carried twice in the 1990s. It is very likely that the party that wins most of these nine states will win the 2004 election.

C. Split Vote-Bush States

Arizona (10 electoral votes)
 Colorado (9)
 Florida (27)
 Georgia (15)
 Montana (3)

The final category of battleground states are these five states (64 electoral votes in 2004) that split their votes in 1992 and 1996 (voting for Clinton one of those years but not the other) and then went for Bush in 2000. In other words, these states have voted Republican in two of the last three presidential elections and Democrats have only one recent win in these states. With the exception of Florida—where the Democrats won in 1996 and essentially tied in 2000—the 2004 Democratic nominee will likely have an even harder time in these states than in the

other two categories of battleground states. Incidentally, these five states will cast seven more electoral votes in 2004 than in 2000 and thus represent places that are both growing in population and trending Republican at the presidential level.

Conclusion

The Democrats start the 2004 campaign with a larger base of states and electoral votes (217) than do the Republicans (135 votes), largely as a result of having won the popular vote in the last three elections. That said, the distance between the 217 electoral votes they begin with and the 270 electoral votes needed to elect may be harder for Democrats to travel than for Republicans. If the nine “Clinton-Bush” states and the five “Split Vote-Bush” states continue their swing away from the Democrats and toward the Republicans, Democrats might fall just short of the number needed to elect even if they successfully win all six of the “Clinton-Gore” states. But it is also possible that those swing states, rather than re-aligning to the Republicans, simply interrupted their previous Democratic voting patterns for specific factors applicable only in 2000 and which may not be duplicated in 2004. Those states might swing back to the Democratic side given a different set of factors in the next election. Still another possibility is that these battleground states are so volatile and so unpredictable that they are not trending one way or the other but rather are in a state of constant flux, winnable by either party and thus likely to see extensive efforts by both. The very unpredictability of these states means that they will be irresistible targets for Democrats and Republicans because it may not be possible for either side to assemble an electoral college majority without them. Voters living in these swing states should expect to be inundated by television advertising and by candidate visits in 2004.

Another interesting anomaly about this election is that the 2004 campaign may be most seriously contested not in the larger states but in the mid-sized and

smaller states. California, Texas, New York and other large states seem to be safely in one camp or the other. Of the eight largest states only Ohio and Florida are among the battleground states in this analysis. Florida, for obvious reasons, will be very hotly contested in 2004. But the other target states for both campaigns in 2004 are likely to be those fifteen battleground states which either voted Republican in 2000 after voting Democratic twice in the 1990s (the “Clinton-Bush” states) or those which voted Democratic in 2000 but only by a plurality instead of a majority (the “Clinton-Gore” states).

It is very likely then that the most competitive, most heavily contested, and most crucial states in the next election will be Oregon, Wisconsin, Iowa, Missouri, New Mexico, West Virginia, Maine, Louisiana, and New Hampshire. While none of these is a large state, they nevertheless seem likely to hold the key to winning in 2004. If recent history proves an accurate forecast for 2004, both campaigns may compete less assiduously in the larger states and instead spend most of their resources in these close, hyper-competitive mid-sized states. Consequently, on Election Night 2004, shrewd observers of the election returns would do well to watch carefully for the results in these states, for it seems likely based on this analysis that the outcome of the 2004 election will hinge on whether Missouri, Oregon, Iowa and the other battleground states light up on the television screens that night as “red” states or as “blue” states.