The geography of an interminable election:
Bush v. Gore, 2000

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Abstract

Republican Bush trailed Democrat Gore by over 500,000 popular votes in the 2000 presidential election. But Bush narrowly edged Gore in the Electoral College to win the U.S. presidency. Several states, including Florida, were decided by less than 2.5% of popular votes. Maps of popular votes at county level and electoral votes at state level show greater support for Bush in the South and West, and greater support for Gore in metropolitan centres. © 2001 Elsevier Science Ltd. All rights reserved.

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Ever since George Washington's re-election to a second term in 1792, the President of the United States has been chosen on a regular four year interval. The seemingly interminable presidential election of 2000 was thus the 54th such event in an uninterrupted chain extending back to the late 18th century. Whereas Washington was the unanimous choice of the Electoral College, Governor George W. Bush of Texas became President only after the Supreme Court, for the first time in American history, intervened in an ongoing Presidential election. The Court's controversial decision by a slim 5–4 majority on December 12, 2000 had the effect of ending a contest that had been unresolved by the popular balloting on November 7. The Electoral College vote of 271 for Bush to 266 for Democrat Al Gore of Tennessee, with one elector in Washington, DC casting a blank ballot in protest, gave Bush the Presidency by one of the narrowest and least convincing margins in US history.

Many Presidents, including Democrat Bill Clinton in 1992 and 1996, won majori-
ties in the Electoral College after receiving only a plurality and not a majority of the popular vote, but very few Presidential candidates have won in the Electoral College after losing the popular vote. Thus Bush belongs to a short list of Electoral College winners who were popular vote losers, including John Quincy Adams in 1824, Rutherford B. Hayes in 1876, and Benjamin Harrison in 1888.

The purpose of this paper is to examine the geographical underpinnings of the election of 2000. For comparisons, Table 1 summarizes the outcomes of the 6 most recent presidential elections at the national level. An absolute majority or at least 270 out of 538 electoral votes is necessary for victory. Three of the elections were decided by both popular and Electoral College majorities, including victories by Republican Ronald Reagan of California in 1980 and 1984, and by Republican George H.W. Bush in 1988. In 1992, Democrat Clinton out polled the senior Bush by 43.0% to 37.4% of the popular vote, and won handily in the Electoral College. Independent Ross Perot received 18.9% of the popular vote in 1992; one of the strongest showings of any 3rd party candidate in America during the 20th century. Though Perot failed to win any electoral votes himself, his popular votes may have edged the Electoral College votes of several states into the Clinton column. Perot’s participation again prevented either major party candidate from exceeding 50% of the national popular vote in 1996; but Republican challenger Robert Dole would have needed more than all of Perot’s popular votes in addition to his own in order to have beaten Clinton in the national popular vote in the last election of the 20th century.

The exact number of voters will never be known with certainty, but it seems apparent that the first presidential contest of the 21st century attracted more Americans to the polls than any previous election. According to the US National Archives and Records Administration, the “Vote totals as shown on each State’s Certificate of Ascertainment” for the 2000 presidential election sum to an overall total of 105,363,298 popular presidential ballots (http://nara.gov/fedreg/electcoll/2000popres.html, June 20, 2001). However, additional popular ballots seem to have been counted in some states even after these Certificates were submitted, and there may have been some clerical errors (such as omission of the popular vote for Reform candidate Pat Buchanan in the National Archives and Records Administration record for Illinois, for example). To be sure, late-counted popular ballots would not have influenced the outcome, but they can convey information about geographical patterns of popular sentiments, however.

In order to assemble state-level data as complete as possible, I accessed the Internet pages of the Secretary of State or other appropriate official in each of the 50 US states in mid-June, 2001. Most of the state-level tallies obtained from each state correspond to those reported to and by the US National Archives and Records Administration, but where differences existed the numbers obtained directly from each state were the ones used in calculating values shown in Table 1. The results indicate a national vote total for the 2000 presidential election of 105,378,873 valid and counted popular votes, a total which is somewhat larger than commonly reported elsewhere. According to the US Census, the estimated voting age population of the United States was about 205.8 million on November 7, 2000 (US Census, “Projec-
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<th>Election</th>
<th>Total popular vote</th>
<th>Democratic popular vote</th>
<th>Democratic percent</th>
<th>Democratic electoral vote</th>
<th>Republican popular vote</th>
<th>Republican percent</th>
<th>Republican electoral vote</th>
<th>Leading 3rd party popular vote</th>
<th>Leading 3rd party percent</th>
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<td>13</td>
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<td>48 886 097</td>
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<td>49.2</td>
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<td>271</td>
<td>2 864 171</td>
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Sources: For 1980 to 1996: America Votes (Congressional Quarterly, various years) for 2000: Each state's Secretary of State or Election Board office via Internet; US National Archives and Records Administration via Internet.
tions of the Voting-Age Population for States: November 2000; Last Revised November 2, 2000," http://www.census.gov/population/www/socdemo/voting/tabs00.html, November 7, 2000). Together, the Census voting age population estimate and the vote total reported here imply a national turnout rate of 51.2%, which is also slightly higher than rates usually reported elsewhere.

The geographical pattern of the popular vote is shown at county-level from a Republican perspective on Fig. 1. For most of the nation, the county-level data represented on Fig. 1 were obtained from the CNN web site in late November, 2000 (http://www.cnn.com/ELECTION/results/national.html). Data for Alaska which reports votes by election district, and for New England states which report votes by townships also were obtained in late November, 2000 via Internet from those states’ offices of Secretary of State or other appropriate official. The map shows voting districts for Alaska and counties or parishes for the rest of the United States. In the case of New England, township-level values were aggregated to county-level using GIS technology. For the nation as a whole, the data represented in Fig. 1 comprise about 98.4% of all voting returns. Most of the votes unaccounted for by the data used for Fig. 1 appear to have been write-in votes for very minor candidates in several states, or late-counted absentee ballots in a few states.

Counties where very high proportions of voters cast ballots in support of Electors for the Republican presidential ticket are especially common in the Great Plains and Interior West. Elsewhere, counties with majority to very strong Republican support are quite numerous in the South and Midwest. Overall, Bush received majority or plurality voter support in 2364 or 75% of the 3136 county or county equivalent units represented on Fig. 1. Lightly shaded areas where Democratic support was concentrated are most common in the metropolitan Northeast, the Pacific West Coast, and in areas of the South and Southwest with substantial Black, Hispanic, or Native American populations. Gore received majority or plurality support in 772 out of 3136 county or county-equivalent units represented in Fig. 1.

Fig. 2 depicts the outcome of the 2000 presidential election from the Electoral College perspective, and also shows the sizes of the popular pluralities by which the leading candidate in each state captured that state’s electoral votes. These pluralities are represented as percentages. The percentages were calculated separately for each state by first subtracting the popular vote for the losing major party candidate from the popular vote for the winning major party candidate, and then dividing the resulting major party vote difference by the state’s total of all popular votes including those reported for all third party and write-in candidates.

Plurality percentages shown in Fig. 2 are classed into 3 levels each for both Bush and Gore. The lowest classes categorize states in which the margin of victory was less than 2.5% of the total popular vote. These states can be considered “Quarrel-over” states, since precinct-level miss-counts, barely legible votes, disputed ballots and the like can arguably comprise as much as 2.5% of the total vote cast in any state. The middle classes categorize states in which the margin of victory was from 2.5% to 9.9%. States in this group can be considered “Contested” states which both major party candidates had reasonable chances of winning. Many of these were in fact treated as “Battleground” states during the election campaign. The highest
classes categorize states in which the margin of victory was 10% or more of the total popular vote. These can be considered "Landslide" states in which the losing candidate had little realistic hope of winning any electoral votes.

Twenty-eight states and the District of Columbia fall in the Landslide category, in which the winning candidate's margin of victory was at least 10% of the total popular vote. The eighteen Landslide states won by Bush are mainly in the South or Interior West. In six of these states, including Alaska, Idaho, Montana, Nebraska, Utah, and Wyoming, Bush's popular plurality was greater than one-quarter of the total votes cast. In his home state of Texas, Bush's popular plurality was an appreciable 21.3% of the total vote. Most of the eleven Landslide states in the Gore column are in either the Northeast or the Far West. Three major metropolitan states are in Gore's Landslide category, including California, Illinois and New York, where the pluralities were 11.8%, 12.1%, and 24.9% of the total vote, respectively. Rhode Island was the only state in which Gore's plurality exceeded one-quarter of the total popular vote, as it did in the District of Columbia.

Fifteen states fall in the intermediate Contested category, in which the winning candidate's margin of victory was from 2.5% to 9.9%. Many of these states are located near the margins of the nation's major Northern, Southern and Western sections so that an east-west band of states in the upper South, and a north-south band of states bordered by the Mississippi River, are conspicuous on the map. New England and the Southwest are also subregions with several states in the Contested
category. Ten of the Contested states were won by Bush, with the other five won by Gore.

Seven states, including Florida, fell in the Quarrel-over category, in which the winning candidate’s margin of victory was less than 2.5% of the total popular vote. Bush won Florida and New Hampshire, while Gore won Iowa, Minnesota, New Mexico, Oregon and Wisconsin. In Florida and New Mexico, the popular margin of victory was less than 1000 votes. If the figures for all seven Quarrel-over states are summed together, it is found that a total of 15,020,619 validated ballots were cast in all of these states combined. Gore received a total of 7,235,496 votes in these seven states, compared with a total of 7,167,654 for Bush, giving Gore a combined plurality of 67,842 votes, or 0.45% of the combined vote of the Quarrel-over states. In the electoral tally, Gore received 40 of these states’ electoral votes, to 29 for Bush. So, in one sense, Gore benefitted from a favorable Electoral College seats/votes electoral bias among these seven states combined. Of course, the Supreme Court prevented the electoral bias from swinging even further in Gore’s direction in the State of Florida, and that decided the election.

Perhaps equally plausibly, the election was decided by the influences of third party and write-in candidates. Among the seven Quarrel-over states combined, Green Party candidate Ralph Nader attracted a total of 468,434 popular votes. This is nearly seven times greater than the overall vote difference between Bush and Gore among the seven states. Indeed, even Reform Party candidate Pat Buchanan’s total vote count of 67,922 popular votes was greater than the overall vote difference between Bush and Gore among these states. So too was the combined total of 81,113 votes which were received by minor third party or write-in candidates.

A similarly murky picture emerges when the national totals are re-examined a bit more closely. Nationally, Gore out-polled Bush by about 540,252 validated popular votes. Nader’s national total was an estimated 2,864,171 votes, or more than 5 times greater than the Gore plurality over Bush. Buchanan’s popular total was an estimated 448,848 votes, or nearly as many as the Gore-Bush differential. And, another 619,312 votes were written-in or cast for other even more minor third-party candidates. So, on the one hand, it may seem that Gore, who apparently won the national popular vote, might think that he should bash Nader for his own narrow loss to Bush in the Electoral College. But, on the other hand, it may also seem that Bush, who won so narrowly in the Electoral College, should thank Reform Party (dis)organizers for quarreling among themselves so long that enough of their disgusted supporters ended up voting for Bush rather than Buchanan in just enough scattered communities in just enough vital states like New Hampshire to inaugurate the first American President of the twenty-first century as a popular vote loser who won the Electoral College.