

Nick Butler
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An Analysis of Voting Trends in the 2000 Presidential Election

The 2000 Presidential election was a highly contested race between Al Gore and George W. Bush. The election was extremely close, with a few key factors ultimately deciding the outcome. The outcome of the election was a rare occurrence in American politics, with George Bush carrying the electoral votes needed to win, but losing the national popular vote to Al Gore. Examining key events surrounding the election, polling data from throughout the campaign, and the demographics of voters will help create a clear picture of why this election had the outcome that it did.

Background and Pre-Election Polls

The 2000 election was held during a period of economic prosperity and peace in the United States. This means that the focus on the election wasn't on the economy or foreign relations, but rather education and other more morally based issues (religion, health care, government, etc.). This is shown in an ABC News/Money Poll that were taken in the lead up to the election, which showed that 65% of American believed that the U.S. economy was "Good" and only 23% thought it was "Not so good" or poor. Conducted in the same poll, 61% of Americans rated their own personal finances as

being good.¹

Because of the economic prosperity seen during this period, more Americans believed that the country was on the right track than the wrong track according to a question asked in the same ABC News/Money Poll. This would seemingly help Vice President Gore, who of course held national office during this period of economic prosperity. Considering these factors, a panel of seven political science forecasters actually predicted two months prior to the election at a major national convention that Al Gore would handily defeat George W. Bush, taking between 53% and 60% of the popular vote.

If we examine favorability/unfavorability opinion polls leading up to the election, we're able to see the national mood towards the candidates in the lead up to this election. In the case of George W. Bush, his favorability reaches it's highest point about a week before the election, with 62% of respondents saying they have a favorable opinion of him according to a Gallup poll.²

On the other hand, Al Gore saw his lowest favorability rating a week prior to the election, with only 53% of those polled by Gallup saying they have a favorable opinion of the Vice President.³ However, in the week of the general election, Vice President Gore and Governor Bush's favorability and unfavorability ratings were statistically tied, with 56% and 55% favorability respectively, and both 39% unfavorability.

¹ ROPER Center Public Opinion Archives, "Presidential Election 2000," n.d.,
<http://www.ropercenter.uconn.edu/elections/presidential/presidential_election_2000.html>

² Gallup, "Favorability: People in the News," n.d.,
<<http://www.gallup.com/poll/1618/favorability-people-news.aspx#1>>

³ Gallup, "Favorability: People in the News," n.d.,
<<http://www.gallup.com/poll/1618/favorability-people-news.aspx#3>>

It's important to also remember that President Bill Clinton had recently gone through the impeachment process, and although he got through it with his job intact, he suffered a huge political loss in terms of the public's view of his character. Although Clinton maintained a strong approval rating, Americans were generally displaced by the problems surrounding his administration. In a poll conducted a few months prior to the 2000 election, 74% of respondents agreed with the statement, "I am tired of all the problems associated with the Clinton administration."

Ultimately, Vice President Gore was connected to this response as well, even though he was not inherently involved in the scandals surrounding the administration. As much as Gore benefited from a strong, robust economy, he also faced negative effects of being connected to the Clinton Administration. It's hard to tell whether or not this actually had an impact on the final results, but considering it was an election year where the majority of issues discussed were domestic, it's certainly plausible to assume his connection to Clinton could have swayed some voters.

General Election and Tipping Point

The general election between George Bush and Al Gore was extremely close, as we'll see when examining the outcome. Leading up to the election, most of the national polls conducted ended up being incorrect. In 7 of the 10 major national polls conducted, the results overstated Governor Bush's performance by as much as 2% points, and 9 of

the 10 understated Al Gore's performance by as much as 3% points.⁴ The majority of polls conducted in the days before the election showed Governor Bush winning the popular vote, with a margin of between 2% and 5%.

An important moment in this election to consider is the first Presidential debate, where Al Gore stumbled a bit by visibly sighing and groaning while Governor Bush was speaking. Though it wasn't too apparent during the actual debate, the clips of him sighing were linked together by many media outlets and replayed throughout the election cycle creating the image that Al Gore was generally annoyed by Governor Bush, almost to the point of arrogance.⁵

Because of the prevalence of sound bites used in the media, this clip really outshadowed the rest of the debate. In addition to this, Gore had yet another awkward moment in the third debate when he walked towards Governor Bush as if he was about to challenge him physically, only to have Bush stop speaking, look at him, and nod at the Vice President's awkward maneuver.⁶ These moments made Gore seem slightly awkward and even out-of-touch with the issues being discussed. It's challenging to say, however, whether or not this impacted the actual results.

As mentioned, leading into the election Governor Bush had a slight advantage in most polls. Florida was not initially seen as a state that was in contention, with Governor Bush thought to have an advantage because of his brother being the then-Governor of

⁴ NCPP National Council on Public Polls, "Presidential Poll Performance 2000," Jan. 3, 2001, <<http://www.ncpp.org/?q=node/20>>

⁵ CNN, "Do U.S. presidential debates matter," n.d., <<http://www.cnn.com/2012/10/03/politics/presidential-debates-explainer/index.html>>

⁶ YouTube, "Al Gore tries to Intimidate Fight George Bush at Debate Nod," Jan. 14, 2010, <<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oAUcyfKESts>>

Florida. However, moving into September of 2000 both parties realized that the state was going to be in play, and was going to be key to their victories. Because of this, they increased ad buys in the state, although Bush was outspending Gore by about \$2 million as of September 2001.⁷ Ultimately, Florida would be the deciding state.

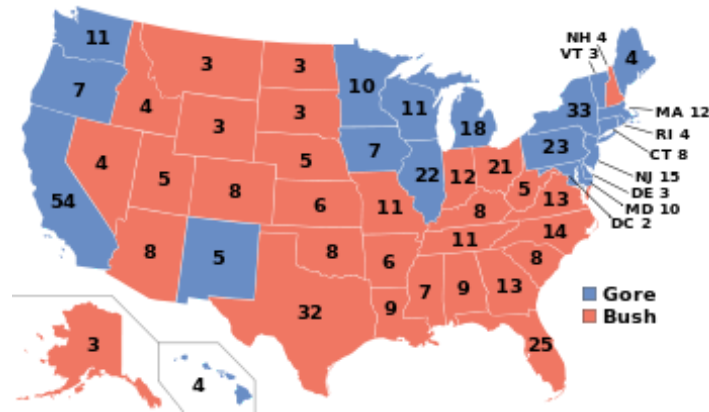
Results

The results of the 2000 Presidential election were anything but decisive. As mentioned, Governor Bush carried the necessary electoral votes needed to win the Presidency, however Vice President Al Gore carried the national popular vote.

President Bush carried 30 states and their 271 electoral votes, while Al Gore carried 20 states and Washington, D.C. and their 266 electoral votes. George Bush received 50,456,002 votes to Al Gore's 50,999,897, a 500,000+ vote difference.⁸ As you can see below, Governor Bush won the Southern states, with the exception of Tennessee (Gore's home state), Ohio, most of the Midwestern states and the Rocky Mountain states, Alaska, and New Hampshire. Gore carried most of the Northeast, the Upper Midwest, and all of the Pacific coast states, including Hawaii.

⁷ New York Times, "In Sign Florida Is Now in Play, Bush Increases Buying There," Sep. 20, 2000, <<http://www.nytimes.com/2000/09/20/us/2000-campaign-ad-campaign-sign-florida-now-play-bush-increases-buying-there.html>>

⁸ U.S. Election Atlas, "United States Presidential Election Results," n.d., <<http://uselectionatlas.org/RESULTS/index.html>>



The results in Florida are most interesting, and they're the most important to this outcome. During election night, all of the major networks called the state of Florida for Vice President Gore early in the evening. However, as the night progressed, they withdrew their prediction, and at around 2:15am reward the state to Governor Bush, declaring him the President-elect. Vice President Gore calls and concedes the election to Governor Bush and proceeds to the convention center where he's set to address his supporters. However, on his way there, aides inform him that the Governor's lead is only a few thousand votes, and that the state hasn't been decided yet. Gore calls Bush and retracts his concession, and never addresses his supporters. By 4:15am, the major networks retract their prediction that Governor Bush is the President-elect.⁹

A machine recount is automatically triggered, and the final tally shows that Governor Bush has a lead of 327 votes out of 6 million ballots cast.⁹ Palm Beach County, in addition to several other counties, start a hand recount of many of the ballots. The election results are contested in various different courts, but eventually a recount is ordered by the Florida Supreme Court in counties that had significant presidential

⁹ TIME Magazin, "How we got here: A timeline of the Florida recount," Dec. 13, 2000, <http://articles.cnn.com/2000-12-13/politics/got.here_1_al-gore-george-w-bush-election-day>

undervotes. However, a day later, the U.S. Supreme Court steps in and and halts the manual recount until they can review the case themselves.⁹

In a 7-2 decision within *Bush v. Gore*, the Court ruled that the Supreme Court's order to recount the ballots was unconstitutional because it did not treat ballots equally. They also ruled 5-4 that in the time remaining before a December 12th "safe harbor" deadline, no constitutionally acceptable recount could be organized.¹⁰ This ultimately certified Florida's most recent vote tally, awarding George W. Bush the state's 25 electoral votes by a 537 vote margin of victory, and with it the Presidency.

Demographics

Examining the demographics of the electorate is key to understanding the results. Below, you can see a full chart of the way groups voted in the 2000 election nationally.¹¹

¹⁰ Oyez Project, "BUSH v. GORE," n.d.,
<http://www.oyez.org/cases/2000-2009/2000/2000_00_949/>

¹¹ ROPER Center, "How Groups Voted in 2000," n.d.,
<http://www.ropercenter.uconn.edu/elections/how_groups_voted/voted_00.html>

2000		Group	Gore	Bush	Buchanan	Nader
All Voters		Pct.	48%	48%	1%	3%
SEX	Men	48	43	54	*	3
	Women	52	54	44	1	2
RACE	White	81	42	55	*	3
	Black	10	90	9	*	1
	Hispanic	7	62	35	1	2
	Asian	2	55	41	1	3
AGE	18-24	9	47	47	*	5
	25-29	8	49	46	1	4
	30-49	45	48	50	*	2
	50-64	24	50	48	1	2
	65 & over	14	51	47	*	2
INCOME	<\$15,000	7	58	38	1	4
	\$15,000-29,999	16	54	42	1	3
	\$30-49,999	24	49	48	1	2
	\$50-74,999	25	46	51	1	2
	\$75-99,999	13	46	52	*	2
	\$100,000 & over	15	43	55	*	3
UNION HOUSEHOLD	Yes	26	59	37	1	3
	No	74	45	53	*	3
REGION	East	23	56	40	*	4
	Midwest	26	48	49	1	2
	South	31	43	56	0	1
	West	20	49	47	1	4
PARTY	Democrat	39	87	11	1	2
	Republican	35	8	91	*	1
	Independent	26	46	48	1	6
POLITICAL PHILOSOPHY	Liberal	20	81	13	1	6
	Moderate	50	53	45	*	2
	Conservative	29	17	82	*	1
GAY/LESBIAN/BISEXUAL	Yes	4	71	25	0	4
	No	96	47	50	1	3

As you can see, Al Gore carried 54% of the female vote which comprised of 52% of the electorate. This is a key demographic to carry, and it often sways democratic. However, this is a 1% decrease from what Bill Clinton carried in 1996. Likewise, Gore received 1% less of the male vote when compared to Clinton in 1996.¹² These two percentage points, considering the overall composition of the male/female vote remained at 48% and 52% respectively in both 1996 and 2000 is key to Gore's possible failure in such a close election.

Another important demographic to consider is the Hispanic vote. In 1996, Clinton carried 73% of the Hispanic vote which comprised of 5% of the electorate.¹² As you can

¹² ROPER Center, "How Groups Voted in 1996," n.d., <http://www.ropercenter.uconn.edu/elections/how_groups_voted/voted_96.html>

see, in 2000 Al Gore only carried 62% of the Hispanic vote, which increased to 7% of the total electorate in that election. This is a significant drop of support and is extremely important when examining Gore's loss. In a state like Florida where the Hispanic vote is extremely important, such a significant drop is hard to overcome, and ultimately may be why he lost.

An important factor in this election was no doubt Ralph Nader's 3rd party candidacy. About 2% of Democrats voted for Nader nationally, compared to virtually none from the Republican party. Likewise, 6% of independents voted for Nader. Gore received a greater share of the independent vote when compared to Bush, so it's not unreasonable to believe that without Nader in the election, many of those independents may have swung toward Gore's candidacy over Bush.

Conclusion

This was the 4th time that a President had been elected without receiving the popular vote in American history, and it renewed calls by many to dispan the electoral system established in the Constitution. The results of this election seem to be a mix of a few different things.

First, I believe that Ralph Nader acted as a spoiler to Al Gore's candidacy. Considering Bush only won the state of Florida by 537 votes, it's very possible that the few thousand people who voted for Nader would've been more inclined to vote for Al Gore. In addition to this, the use of the butterfly ballot in some Florida counties may

have confused voters, who may have accidentally voted for Pat Buchanan instead of Al Gore. Buchanan's high number of vote in Palm Beach cannot be explained by statisticians and he received an extraordinarily high number of votes compared to statistically-based predictions.¹³

Second, I believe that the demographic shift and increase of Hispanic voters, which Gore lost some support of, was the ultimate deciding factor. As mentioned, he lost significant support amongst Hispanic voters compared to Clinton just four years prior, and the overall Hispanic share of voters increased by 2% nationally. This is an extremely factor to consider. Overcoming such a shift in demographics is extremely challenging, and considering the importance of the Hispanic vote in Florida, it's very likely that this was one of the main reasons Gore lost this election.

Finally, I believe that Vice President Gore did not receive as much credit as he should have expected to receive for the success of the American economy under the Clinton administration. This could be for a number of reasons, but it's possibly tied to his likeability factor which dropped following the first Presidential debate. In addition to this, Gore could not escape being connected to the scandal surrounding Bill Clinton's sexual misconduct, even if he was not inherently involved in it.

Ultimately, the 2000 election was one of the closest elections in American history. There were many important factors to consider when examining how Vice President Gore lost the electoral vote, but won the popular vote, in a time of American peace and prosperity. Many believed he would have an easy path to the White House because of

¹³ University of North Carolina, "A Statistical Assessment of Buchanan's Vote in Palm Beach County," n.d., <<http://www.stat.unc.edu/postscript/rs/pap4.pdf>>

the booming American economy, however a shift in demographics and a superior campaign ultimately embarrassed political scientists who predicted Gore would win overwhelmingly.