



Battleground Voters: Partisanship, Issues, and Retrospective Evaluations in Florida 2008

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In our admittedly brief hindsight, 2008 marked a number of electoral milestones. Hillary Clinton was the first female frontrunner for a major-party presidential nomination, only to lose an unexpectedly long and arduous Democratic contest to Barack Obama, whose record fundraising and phenomenal campaign organization paved the way to his becoming the first African-American presidential nominee of a major political party. John McCain's path to the Republican nomination was more conventional, after Rudy Giuliani showed why skipping the early primary and caucus states is likely to remain a wholly unconventional strategy. McCain chose Governor Sarah Palin as the first female Republican vice-presidential nominee, and she and Senator Joe Biden were the first pair of vice-presidential candidates from states with three electoral votes each in modern memory. In the general election, Obama eschewed public

financing, ostensibly to enable a "shock and awe" response to any potential "swift boat" attacks by independent groups, and to pursue a 50 state strategy in an effort to try to change the electoral map.

In spite of the historic campaign events and election result, 2008 followed some more or less usual patterns. The Obama campaign did contract McCain's geographic base, but in the end, Ohio, Pennsylvania, and Florida remained the three key battleground states through which McCain would unsuccessfully try to mount one last comeback. Voters in these battleground states saw the presidential and vice-presidential principals and their surrogates repeatedly in the weeks between the conventions and the general election, and as we shall see, Florida voters mostly relied on two of the simplest and most time-tested cues in deciding this historic contest.

Data

We analyze data from surveys of Florida residents conducted in the fall of 2008 to examine the effects of party, retrospective evaluations, and issues on voter preferences. An October pre-election survey of 504 adult residents of households in Florida was conducted throughout October 2008 by the Survey Research Center (SRC) in the Bureau of Economic and Business Research at the University of Florida, in conjunction with its monthly consumer confidence survey. In addition to standard questions about consumer confidence and demographics, respondents were asked thirteen questions about campaign interest, vote intention, and issues. UF's SRC also conducted a post-election survey in conjunction with its November 2008 consumer confidence survey in which 449 adult respondents were asked about their current perceptions of the economy, political issues, and demographics, as well as turnout and vote choice in the presidential election. Our analyses of October data here are limited to self-identified registered voters, and our analysis of November data are limited to 338 respondents who said that "I'm sure that I voted" in response to our turnout question.

Party

With only a few exceptions in the last half-century, the pull of partisanship on voter choice in presidential elections has been slightly stronger for Republicans than for Democrats. The beginning of our story

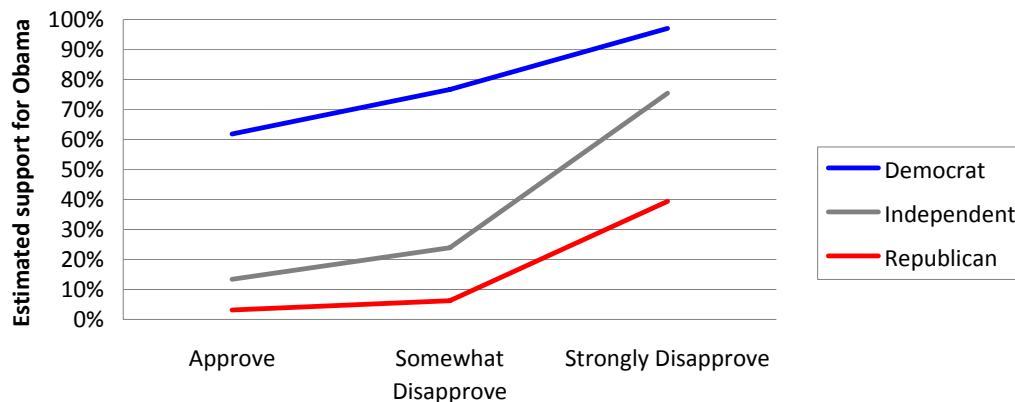
of the 2008 election is that the pull of partisanship was very strong, and Democrats were about as loyal in their support for Obama as Republicans were for McCain. Among registered voters in our October pre-election survey, Democrats enjoyed a 38% to 34% advantage over Republicans in party identification, with the balance (28%) identifying as Independents or expressing no preference for either party. Democrats were also slightly more loyal in their vote preference, as 92% of Democratic identifiers either preferred Obama or leaned toward voting for him, while 88% of Republican identifiers preferred or leaned toward McCain. The November post-election survey showed a slight Republican advantage among respondents who said that they actually voted (42% Republican to 35% Democratic, with 23% Independent), and the more usual pattern of slightly stronger Republican partisanship in the voting booth: 92% of Republican voters cast ballots for McCain, while Obama retained the support of 89% of Democratic voters in our sample. That's not much of a difference, especially considering that the Democratic loyalty to Obama followed a tough and grueling nomination struggle (in which all major Democratic candidates bypassed Florida's controversial January primary) that resulted in the first-major party candidacy of an African-American. But as we shall see, partisanship is only the beginning of the story.

Evaluations of President Bush and the Economy

George W. Bush left office as the most unpopular retiring president since Harry S Truman in 1953. Seeking to capitalize on increasing dissatisfaction with the fragile state of the economy and progress in the war(s) on terror, Obama claimed the “change” mantra early in the campaign, and he successfully defended ownership of that message from attempted usurpation by both Hillary Clinton in the Democratic primaries and John McCain in the general election campaign. Our October pre-election data show the strategy behind that message. McCain was preferred by 88% of Florida’s registered voters who either strongly or somewhat approved of Bush’s job as president, which would have been impressive but

for the fact that figure represented less than 30% of the state’s registered voters. In contrast, 84% of our respondents believed the country was on the “wrong track,” 57% *strongly disapproved* of President Bush’s job performance, and 58% said that, in retrospect, the United States had made the wrong decision to use military force against Iraq. Among the majority of Floridians who *strongly disapproved* of Bush’s job performance, 82% preferred Obama in the October pre-election survey. Figure 1, which presents the predicted probabilities from a logit model estimating preference for Obama, shows that both partisanship and retrospective evaluation of the incumbent administration strongly influenced voters’ pre-election preference.

Figure 1. Effects of partisanship and evaluation of Bush on vote preference



The distances between the lines show the strong effects of partisanship, controlling for Bush evaluation, while the steep slopes show the powerful effects of Bush evaluation: Democrats’ and Republicans’ support for Obama

was about 35 points higher among those who strongly disapproved of Bush than among those who approved, while the gap between Independent approvers and Independent strong disapprovers was 62 points. These data show that

Obama benefited from both a strong partisan pull among Democrats and an equally strong reaction against the incumbent Bush administration.

Floridians' evaluations of economic conditions were also bleak, as shown in Table 1.

Table 1: Evaluations of the economy and voter choice

	October		November	
	Percent of sample	Percent prefer Obama	Percent of sample	Percent vote for Obama
Current family financial situation compared to one year ago				
Better off	10.5	34.1	9.8	14.7
Same	31.9	41.1	34.7	35.7
Worse off	57.6	61.3	55.6	55.7
Good time to buy big household items?				
Good time	26.3	37.1	31.0	38.6
Uncertain	19.2	46.7	18.8	48.3
Bad time	54.6	62.4	50.1	46.3
Business conditions next 12 months				
Good	16.8	42.4	15.7	63.0
Uncertain	38.2	52.6	34.7	46.8
Bad	45.0	55.8	49.6	38.9
Fearful about the nations' economic future?				
Extremely	--	--	18.5	39.3
Somewhat	--	--	56.6	45.4
Not very	--	--	14.8	51.0
Not at all	--	--	10.1	51.4
Fearful about family's economic future?				
Extremely	--	--	12.7	40.9
Somewhat	--	--	45.6	53.6
Not very	--	--	24.9	43.7
Not at all	--	--	16.7	31.0

Source: Data from statewide October (pre-election) and November (post-election) consumer confidence surveys.

Overall, our respondents in both October and November generally had negative assessments of their current family financial situation compared to a year ago, opinions about whether now

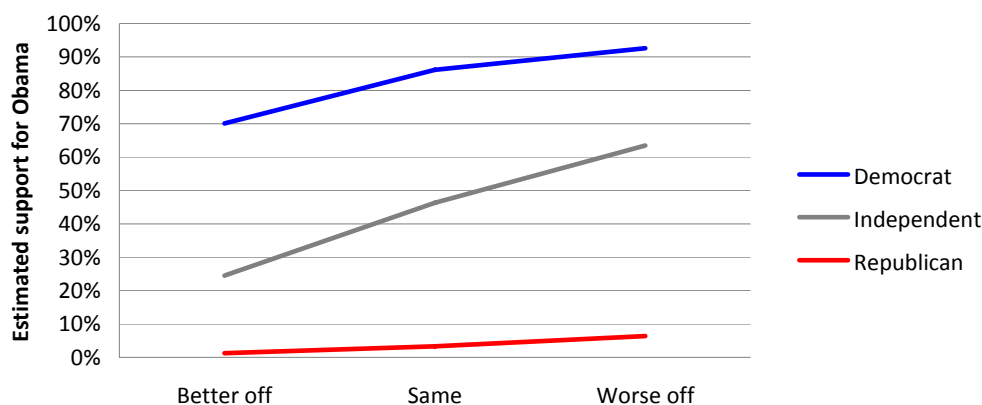
was a good time to buy major household items, and the prospects for business conditions in the country as a whole over the next twelve months. Not surprisingly, those with the most

negative assessments about their own pocketbooks were generally more inclined to prefer Obama. However, our data suggest that economic assessments were somewhat mediated by partisanship.

As Figure 2 shows, the effects of retrospective pocketbook evaluations in

explaining voter choice in our November sample were largely limited to Independents, as self-identified Republicans were virtually oblivious to the economy as a factor in their voting decision.

Figure 2. Effects of partisanship and family financial condition on vote choice



Moreover, the outcome of the election seemed to bring voters' economic crystal balls into a partisan focus. In the pre-election October survey, the few optimists about the nation's economic future tended to support McCain, while in the post-election November survey, roughly the same percentage of economic optimists tended to disproportionately report voting *for* Obama.

After the dramatic economic shocks in September and October 2008, we tried to gauge the degree to which the economic news of the day affected people emotionally with two new questions in the November survey:

- People have different concerns about the future of the nation's economy.

Would you say that you are extremely fearful, somewhat fearful, not very fearful, or not at all fearful about the nation's economic future?

- How about for your own family's financial future? Would you say that you are extremely fearful, somewhat fearful, not very fearful, or not at all fearful about your family's financial future?

In the aggregate, responses to questions in the lower half of Table 1 show plenty of anxiety, though more respondents reported fear about the nation's economic future than about their own family's prospects. A significant proportion of our respondents was *extremely* fearful about the country's economic future (18.5%),

and *three-fourths* of the state's consumers were at least *somewhat* fearful about the nation's economy. "Pocketbook" fear was only slightly less widespread; 12.7% were extremely fearful for their own family's financial future, while 58% were at least somewhat fearful. One might suspect that such widespread fear would work to the benefit of the "change" candidate, but in our November post-election survey, those who were most fearful about the future of the national economy were actually slightly *less* likely to support Obama. Economic anxiety was widespread in late 2008, but Obama's election apparently intensified that anxiety among Republicans and relieved some of it among Democrats. In short, these data suggest that the election result provided a prism through which our respondents projected the economic future.

Issues

Both major party candidates argued that the 2008 election represented the clearest choice in a generation. Obama and McCain agreed that they differed on the approach that government should take in providing services, reconciling the demand for energy with environmental protection, and regulating abortion. Our estimates show that a few issues contributed a little to voters' preferences between Obama and McCain, but not nearly as much as the campaign rhetoric would have suggested. In this section, we show the effects of three issues—abortion, government spending, and support for

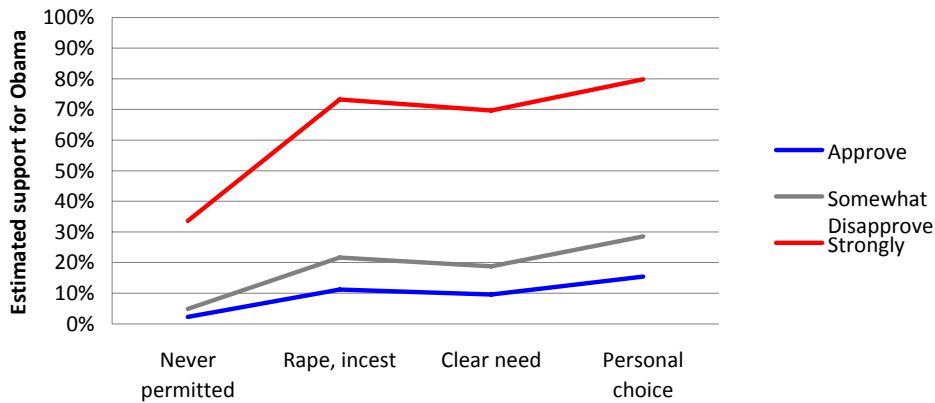
offshore drilling—based on separate logit analyses of October preferences controlling for partisanship and retrospective evaluations of President Bush.

When we asked our October respondents their opinion on abortion policy, a majority selected the most pro-choice alternative that we offered ("By law, a woman should always be able to obtain an abortion as a matter of personal choice"), and 65.6% of those respondents preferred Obama. While McCain received majority support from respondents who preferred any restriction at all on a woman's right to choose, evidence of issue voting based on opinion about abortion is significantly weakened in a multivariate model controlling for party and Bush approval.

In [Figure 3](#), which shows the expected probabilities derived from that model for Independents, the effect of abortion opinion is represented by the slopes of the lines, while the effect of Bush job approval is represented by the distance between those lines.

The minority of absolutist abolitionists was significantly less supportive of Obama than all others, but the slopes representing the effect of the issue taper off, while the effect of Bush (dis)approval looms large among other Independent respondents. In short, it appears that abortion mattered a little (on average) in shaping voter choice in 2008, but not nearly as much as Bush approval.

Figure 3. Effects of Bush job approval and abortion opinion on vote choice (Independents)

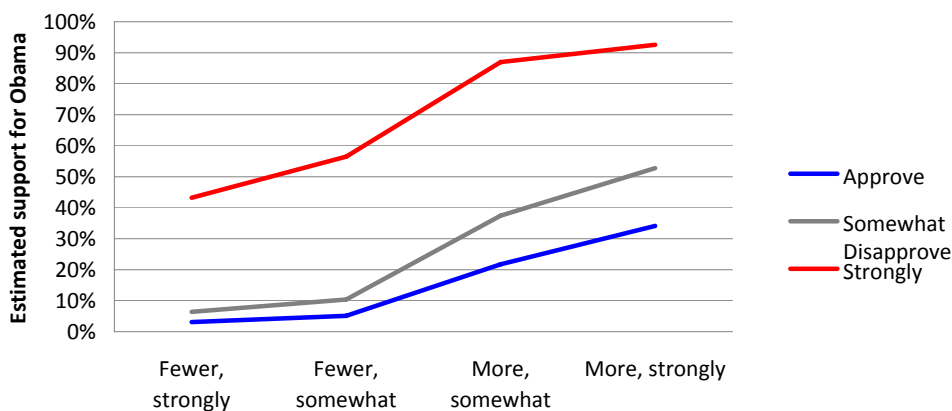


In spite of the importance of “new” moralist issues such as abortion, opinions about government spending and the extent to which government should provide services continue to play an important role in defining political cleavages. In our October survey, a slim majority of respondents (55%) indicated that they preferred that government “provide more services, even if it meant an increase in spending,” and three-

fourths of them preferred Obama. Among the large minority of respondents who preferred fewer services and less spending, nearly three-fourths preferred McCain.

Figure 4 displays the estimated probabilities of supporting Obama among Independents, and it shows that the effect of this issue remains pronounced among Independents.

Figure 4. Effects of Bush job approval and services opinion on vote choice (Independents)



The large distances between the issue support lines illustrate the importance of Bush approval, while the steep slopes

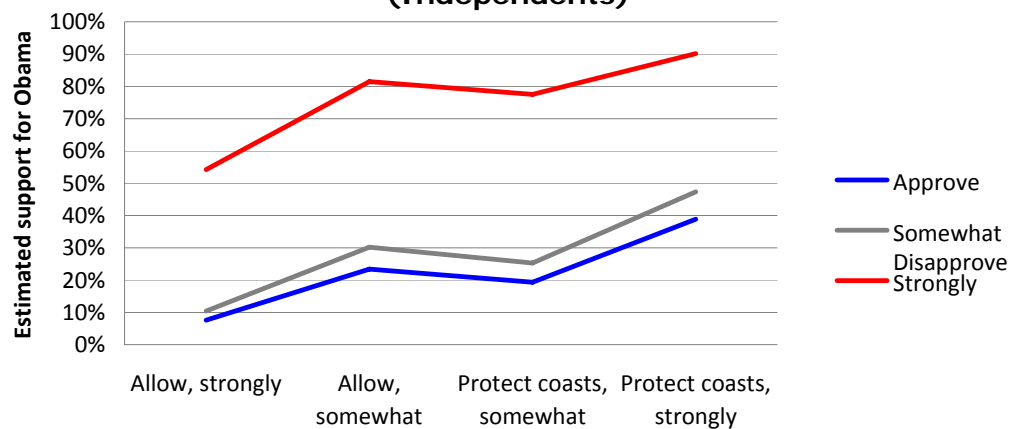
show the strong effect of this most traditional New Deal issue in shaping candidate support in 2008.

As American consumers were stunned by \$4 per gallon summer gas prices, chants of “drill, baby, drill” echoed out of the Republican convention in Minneapolis. Floridians (both in the mass public and those who were elected to represent them) had long opposed offshore drilling, fearing possible damage to the environmentally sensitive and tourist-friendly pristine Gulf and Atlantic beaches. But during the fall campaign, Governor Charlie Crist (who was on McCain’s vice-presidential short list) voiced support for leasing large offshore tracts to

expand domestic production of oil and gas. Many Floridians apparently agreed, as fifty-seven percent of October respondents agreed more with “Oil companies should be allowed to drill off Florida’s shores in order to increase oil production” than with “We need to protect Florida’s coasts from the environmental dangers of drilling offshore.”

Figure 5 shows the estimated probabilities of support of Independents for Obama, and illustrates the significant effect of this issue on vote preference.

Figure 5. Effects of Bush job approval and offshore drilling opinion on vote choice (Independents)



For Independents, moving from strong support for drilling to strong support for protecting the coasts corresponds to about a 35% increase in the probability of preferring Obama, net of Bush approval. Evaluations of President Bush again have a strong effect, independent of one’s position on offshore drilling. Indeed, we estimate that an Independent “driller” who

strongly disapproved of Bush’s job performance had a higher probability of voting for Obama than a “coast hugger” who only somewhat disapproved of Bush’s performance.

All in all, our analysis suggests that a few issues did matter in shaping Floridians’ vote preferences. Obama benefited modestly from the balance of opinion favoring more government

services, but lost some support as Florida's leaders and voters shifted toward greater support for offshore drilling. In the aggregate, however, neither of these issues, nor abortion or any other issue we asked about, outweighed the importance of retrospective evaluation of the incumbent president in shaping voter preference. Despite McCain's late protestations that "I'm not President Bush," for all intents and purposes, Floridians voted almost as if he was.

Conclusion

While 2008 may go down in history as a watershed election that returned Democrats to unified control of the White House and both Houses of Congress, elevated the son of an African to the presidency, and cracked the glass ceiling for women politicians of both parties, ultimately most Florida voters' decisions in this election reflected the simplest of political evaluations: partisanship and retrospective evaluation of the incumbent. Roughly nine in ten Democrats and Republicans remained loyal to their partisan identifications in the voting booth. Given the party parity among registered voters and the Republican advantage among actual voters in our surveys, that would not have been enough for Obama to secure Florida's electoral votes without the support of most Independents. While "old" issues (such as government spending and abortion) and "new" issues (such as offshore drilling) shaped some of their votes, a general sense that the country was on

the "wrong track" tilted a majority of Independents toward Obama. For the most part, it appears that issues shaped voter choice mostly through evaluations of President Bush and partisanship. Most people who favored restricting access to abortions, more offshore drilling, and less government spending identify to some degree as Republicans, and most of them had more favorable (or, at least, less unfavorable) evaluations of President Bush, while those who favored abortion rights, opposed offshore drilling, and were supportive of more government spending and services tended to be more Democratic and had stronger unfavorable evaluations of the outgoing Republican president. The fact that retrospective voting on George W. Bush figured so powerfully in our analysis of the vote is itself significant politically, in that McCain's attempts to silence the incumbent president during the general election campaign and show some distance from him were overwhelmed by Obama's effective delivery of his twin mantras of "change" and "no third term."

Acknowledgements

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