

The Red-Blue Divide

By Andrew Brod

Greensboro News & Record, November 28, 2004

The election of 2004 appeared to cement in our cultural lexicon the terms “red state” and “blue state.” For many people, the closeness of these last two elections has driven home the realization that people don’t elect the president; states do. Each state has a certain number of votes, and each state holds an election to decide how it’s going to allocate those votes. As most of us know, the “red states” are those that voted for President Bush and the “blue states” are those that voted for Senator Kerry.

The red-blue divide has been used to compare the two different parts of America. Some of these comparisons are whimsical, such as, “He’s so blue-state.” Some are angry, such as the oft-forwarded email I received recently that noted (among other things) that blue states have all the Ivy League universities and red states have all the tornadoes. (This isn’t even true; my home state of Illinois is pretty darn blue, and I remember plenty of tornadoes when I was a kid.)

Whimsy and anger aside, what are the facts about red vs. blue states? Are there differences between the two groups? I looked at a few socioeconomic indicators to see what differences emerged. My list of indicators is by no means exhaustive but it does begin to paint a picture that goes beyond red and blue.

I’ve omitted the District of Columbia from these comparisons, which leaves 31 red states and 19 blue states. Therefore, 62 percent of the states, including North Carolina, are red. On average, blue states are more populous than red states, which is why the popular vote for president was close.

Population density: Blue states are more densely populated, reflecting strong urban support for Democratic candidates and strong rural support for Republicans. Of the 15 most densely populated states, 12 are blue. The 11 least densely populated states are all red. The densest state is New Jersey (blue) and the sparsest is Alaska (red).

Income per person: Ten of the richest 12 states by this measure are blue, led by Connecticut. The 16 poorest states are all red, with the usual cohort of Southern states (but not North Carolina!) at the bottom.

Net federal spending: For each state, the Tax Foundation calculates the ratio of federal receipts per dollar of federal taxes paid. A number above one means that the state is a net receiver of federal funding; a number below one means that it’s a net payer. In 2003, North Carolina ranked 26th by this measure, receiving \$1.09 from the federal government for every tax dollar it paid.

You might think that blue states would rank quite high in this category, because don’t welfare-dependent Democratic states suck at the federal teat? In fact the opposite is true. Of the 14 states with the highest receipt-to-payment ratios, 13 are red states. The leader here is New Mexico (which admittedly only barely went red), which received \$1.99 for every tax dollar paid.

Of the 14 states with the lowest ratios, 12 are blue. The low state on the totem pole here is New Jersey (blue), which received only 57 cents in federal money for every dollar it paid.

What about changes in this ratio? Perhaps the states whose receipt-to-tax ratio rose the most are blue states? Nope. Over the last ten years, the states that saw their ratios increase the most tend to be red. These states are led by Alaska, which now receives 59 cents *more* federal dollars per tax dollar paid than it did 10 years ago. In fact, of the 23 states that gained a dime or more, only two are blue states. North Carolina is among them, ranked 16th with a gain of 16 cents per tax dollar paid.

The big losers in this regard are a bit more mixed, though most of them (seven of the bottom nine, for example) are blue states. The three biggest losers are California (blue), Colorado (red), and Massachusetts (blue), each of which receives 19 to 20 cents less per tax dollar paid than it did 10 years ago.

Federal tax burden per dollar of income: Surely blue states must be better at avoiding federal taxes, right? Well, the states with the heaviest tax burden per dollar of income are about evenly split between red and blue. But of the 20 states with the lightest tax burdens, 18 are red. North Carolina does its part, ranking 28th and paying 16.7 percent of its income in federal taxes. The leader by this measure is Connecticut (blue) at 21.7 percent. At the bottom is Mississippi (red) at 15.2 percent.

Federal employees: I figured this indicator could go either way. States with a lot of federal workers could prefer Democrats, who are traditionally the party of big government, or Republicans, who have recently discovered how much fun it is to make government bigger. Let's ignore Maryland (blue) and Virginia (red) momentarily, which have large numbers of federal jobs primarily because of their proximity to D.C. Of the rest, 11 of the 12 states with the highest ratios of federal employees are red. The leader is Alaska, with about 22 civilian federal employees per 1,000 population.

It's a little more mixed at the low end, with nine of the 15 states with the lowest rate of federal employment being blue. The two lowest are Michigan and Wisconsin, both blue states with fewer than six civilian federal employees per 1,000 population. Red North Carolina is in here as well, ranked 38th with about 7 civilian federal employees per 1,000 population.

Crime rate: I remember a lot of talk after the 2000 election about crime rates, with great weight placed on the notion that Democratic strongholds were high-crime areas. And of course urban areas have their share of crime. At the state level, I looked at Department of Justice statistics on both violent and property crime, and there wasn't a clear pattern for violent crime. But of the 11 states with the lowest rates of property crime, eight are blue (though red South Dakota has the lowest rate, at about 2,000 incidents per 100,000 population).

Arizona (red) is at the other end of the spectrum, with over 5,600 incidents of property crime per 100,000 population. The next three states are blue, but the next 15 after that are all red. North Carolina ranks 12th, with nearly 4,300 incidents per 100,000 population. Overall, the property-crime rate in blue states is about 25 percent lower than in red states.

Educational attainment: Since Election Day, frustrated Democrats have been searching high and low for anything to help themselves feel better. A number of Democrats have settled on the interpretation that “there’s more of them but we’re smarter.” Can the data shed any light on this? The educational attainment of people 25 years old and up isn’t a measure of intelligence *per se*, but let’s take a look anyway.

Of the 14 states with the highest percentage of bachelor’s degrees or higher, 12 are blue states (I guess it’s all those Ivy League universities). Massachusetts (blue) leads the pack, with 33.2 percent of its people above the age of 25 with a bachelor’s degree or more. All 16 of the states with the lowest percentages are red. West Virginia (red) trails the pack, with 14.8 percent with college degrees. North Carolina is in the middle of the pack, ranked 28th with 22.5 percent with a bachelor’s degrees or more.

Of the 12 states with the highest percentage of people with less than a 9th-grade education, 11 are red, led by Kentucky (red) with nearly 12 percent. North Carolina comes in at number 16, with about eight percent. The ranking is more mixed at the low end (i.e. the good end) of this category. Red states Wyoming and Utah have the best scores, each with only about three percent with less than a 9th-grade education.

What does all this say? I don’t think it says that red states are better than blue or vice versa. But it does highlight some of what divides red and blue states. Our common ground may be greater than our differences, but our differences sure are interesting.

According to these measures, red states tend to be poorer and less densely populated, receive more in federal spending than they pay in federal taxes, pay less tax per dollar of income, have more federal employees, suffer more property crime, and have less educated workforces. And vice versa, more or less, for blue states. Through various social and political mechanisms, these differences were translated into the voting patterns that led to the current color pattern of our electoral map.

And now this break-down will serve as the cultural starting line for mid-term elections in 2006 and the presidential election in 2008. Candidates, take your marks! But don’t forget your colors.

© Copyright 2004, *News & Record*