

# Florida's Solid Bellwether State Status: Alive and Well in 2009

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In 2009, our state remains the “location of choice” for parties, political consultants, and the media to gauge public sentiment on just about any topic. It was no surprise to political observers that President Obama headed to Florida the day after his prime time speech to the nation to promote passage of his Economic Stimulus Package. Nor was it shocking when national political handicappers immediately predicted Florida's open U.S. Senate seat contest would be the nation's most interesting Senate race in the 2010 election cycle.

In 2008, as in 2004, presidential election exit polls showed that the Florida electorate more closely mirrored the national electorate than any other large battleground state. The state maintained its reputation as a bellwether state: “As Florida goes, so goes the nation.” Most think it will stay that way.

## RACIAL/ETHNIC MAKEUP

In recent years, Florida's racial/ethnic mix has generally been described as a microcosm of America's population. In the 2008 election, the Florida electorate was slightly more racially/ethnically diverse (less white) than the U.S. overall, mostly as a consequence of its larger Latino population. (See Table 1.) But the state's overall diversity still more closely reflected the national pattern than that of other states.

The voting patterns by race/ethnicity were strikingly similar for whites and African Americans. (See Table 2.) A majority of white voters in the U.S. and in Florida voted for McCain, while African-American voters heavily supported Obama at both levels. Although a majority of Florida's Hispanics supported Obama, it was at a lower rate than for Latinos in the U.S. at-large.

Florida's Hispanic population is more divided from a partisan perspective. In 2008, Democratic Hispanics outnumbered Republican Hispanics among registrants, reflecting growth in the non-Cuban Latino population. While the Cuban vote was still solidly Republican and McCain did well with Venezuelans and Nicaraguans, Obama made in-roads among younger Cubans, and those born in Columbia, Argentina, Peru, Mexico, Honduras, the Dominican Republic, and Puerto Rico.

**Table 1. Share of the Electorate by Race/Ethnicity**

		Florida	National
Race	White	71	74
	African American	13	13
	Latino	14	9
	Asian	1	2
	Other	1	3

Source: Presidential exit polls.

**Table 2. Voting Patterns by Race/Ethnicity**

	Florida			National		
	Obama	McCain	Other	Obama	McCain	Other
White	42	56	2	43	55	2
African American	96	4	N/A	95	4	1
Latino	57	42	1	67	31	2
Asian	N/A	N/A	N/A	62	35	3
Other	N/A	N/A	N/A	66	31	3

Source: Presidential exit polls.

## GENDER

Historically, women have made up a larger portion of the electorate in the U.S. for several decades. The pattern continued in 2008—both in Florida and the U.S. (See Table 3.) However, the female-male gap narrowed slightly (1 percent).

Support for Obama was higher among Florida males than nationally, although Obama got a plurality of that vote as well. (See Table 4.) A majority of women voters at both levels supported Obama although the proportion was slightly lower among Florida’s female voters.

While general voting patterns by gender were similar in both Florida and the U.S., the gender gap was narrower in Florida than in the U.S. (1 percent v. 7 percent respectively). This is reflective of the state’s battleground status. The proportion of women who are Republican is higher in Florida.

**Table 3. Share of the Electorate by Sex**

Sex	Male	Florida	National
		Female	47
		53	53

Source: Presidential exit polls.

**Table 4. Voting Patterns by Sex**

	Florida			National		
	Obama	McCain	Other	Obama	McCain	Other
Male	51	47	2	49	48	3
Female	52	47	1	56	43	1

Source: Presidential exit polls.

## AGE

The age makeup of the Florida electorate in 2008 was not drastically different than that observed nationally (see Table 5.) Overall, the state’s voters were slightly older than voters nationwide but not nearly to the level that many believe. While the stereotypical image of Florida is that of a heavily “grey” state, the difference in the proportion 65 and older voting was much narrower than that (22% in Florida; 16% in the U.S.).

Younger voters at both levels were the staunchest supporters of Obama, although McCain did slightly better among Florida’s younger voters than nationally. (See Table 6.)

Among seniors 65 and older, the vote patterns in Florida and the U.S. were virtually identical. A majority of older citizens voted for McCain. They were more likely to value experience than change, having lived through two very difficult periods in American history—the Great Depression and World War II.

**Table 5. Share of the Electorate by Age**

		Florida	National
Age	18-24	8	10
	25-29	7	8
	30-39	16	18
	40-49	20	21
	50-64	27	27
	65+	22	16

Source: Presidential exit polls.

**Table 6. Voting Patterns by Age**

	Florida			National		
	Obama	McCain	Other	Obama	McCain	Other
18-24	60	39	1	66	32	2
25-29	62	35	3	66	31	3
30-39	53	45	2	54	44	2
40-49	45	54	1	49	49	2
50-64	54	44	2	50	49	1
65+	45	53	2	45	53	2

Source: Presidential exit polls.

## INCOME

The income levels of Florida voters were strikingly similar to those of all U.S. voters. (See Table 7.) This too contradicts the image that many outside Florida have of the sunshine state—as a state rich with wealthy retirees. If income is divided into two categories (less than \$100,000 and more than \$100,000), 76% of Florida voters have incomes less than \$100,000 compared to 74% of all U.S. residents.

The voting patterns by income were also quite similar at both levels, although McCain fared a bit better among Florida’s middle-class voters than he did nationally. (See Table 8.) In general, poorer voters supported Obama, middle-class voters, McCain, and the very wealthiest (\$200,000+), Obama.

Interestingly, scholars have found that the linkages between income and education and partisan voting patterns have become less clear in recent years. The rise of a larger upper middle class has created “a complicated mix of affluent, liberal-leaning professionals and managers, small-business owners, and mid-level white collar workers who are decidedly less so.”<sup>1</sup> (Teixeira, 2008:10).

**Table 7. Share of the Electorate by Income**

		Florida	National
Income	Under \$15,000	8	6
	\$15-30,000	12	12
	\$30-50,000	19	19
	\$50-75,000	23	21
	\$75-100,000	14	15
	\$100-150,000	12	14
	\$150-200,000	7	6
	\$200,000 or more	5	6

Source: Presidential exit polls.

**Table 8. Voting Patterns by Income**

	Florida			National		
	Obama	McCain	Other	Obama	McCain	Other
Under \$15,000	66	33	1	73	25	2
\$15-30,000	62	37	1	60	37	3
\$30-50,000	59	39	2	55	43	2
\$50-75,000	47	52	1	48	49	3
\$75-100,000	39	58	3	51	48	1
\$100-150,000	40	58	2	48	51	1
\$150-200,000	45	54	1	48	50	2
\$200,000 or more	51	48	1	52	46	2

Source: Presidential exit polls.

<sup>1</sup> Ruy Teixeira, The Future of Red, Blue, and Purple America. Paper presented at a conference sponsored by the American Enterprise Institute and the Brookings Institution, February 28. Accessed at [www.brookings.edu/reports/2008/01\\_demographics\\_teixeira](http://www.brookings.edu/reports/2008/01_demographics_teixeira), March 3, 2008

## EDUCATION

The educational backgrounds of voters in Florida and in the U.S., like income, closely mirrored each other, particularly with regard to those with some college or less. (See Table 9.) At the upper levels, Florida had a higher share of college graduates voting in 2008, while the share of voters with post-graduate degrees was larger in the U.S. at-large.

At both levels, support for Obama was heaviest among those with a high school education or less and those with post-graduate degrees (see Table 10). These post graduates—the vast majority of whom were white—played a big role in turning Florida and the nation blue.

The primary difference was among those with some college education and college graduates. In Florida, they were more supportive of McCain than nationally. Republican candidates always do better in Florida among these voters, primarily due to the property tax issue. (Florida remains an anti-tax state.)

**Table 9. Share of the Electorate by Education Level**

		Florida	National
Education	No High School	3	4
	High School Graduate	20	20
	Some College	32	31
	College Graduate	32	28
	Post Graduate	13	17

Source: Presidential exit polls.

**Table 10. Voting Patterns by Education Level**

	Florida			National		
	Obama	McCain	Other	Obama	McCain	Other
No High School	70	29	1	63	35	2
High School Graduate	58	41	1	52	46	2
Some College	49	49	2	51	47	2
College Graduate	45	53	2	50	48	2
Post Graduate	58	41	1	58	40	2

Source: Presidential exit polls.

## RELIGION

The religious preferences of Florida’s voters were quite similar to those of voters at-large with regard to the share who are Protestant, Catholic, Other, or None. The biggest difference is in the proportion that is Jewish—twice as large in Florida as the nation. (See Table 11.)

Voting patterns by religious preference were quite similar in the 2008 presidential election. A majority of Protestants supported McCain, the Jewish vote went heavily for Obama<sup>2</sup> as did the “Other”

<sup>2</sup> Results reported in other polls.

vote and the secular (“None”) vote. The Catholic vote was more divided in Florida, although it leaned toward Obama as it did nationally.

An earlier study on religion in America, conducted in 2007, had reported a surge in the number of persons describing themselves as seculars, unaffiliated with any religion. They were identified as younger (25% of persons 18-29) and male (nearly one in five compared with just 13% of women). That study estimated that 16% of Florida’s population (not just voters) was secular,<sup>3</sup> the same rate as for the U.S. at-large.

**Table 11. Share of the Electorate by Religion**

		Florida	National
Religion	Protestant	52	54
	Catholic	28	27
	Jewish	4	2
	Other	6	6
	None	10	12

Source: Presidential exit polls.

**Table 12. Voting Patterns by Religion**

	Florida			National		
	Obama	McCain	Other	Obama	McCain	Other
Protestant	43	55	2	45	54	1
Catholic	50	49	1	54	45	1
Jewish	N/A	N/A	N/A	78	21	1
Other	80	18	2	73	22	5
None	71	26	3	75	23	2

Source: Presidential exit polls.

## IDEOLOGY

There is a tendency among some to think of Florida as a southern state and as much more conservative than the U.S. at large. That is simply not true and hasn’t been for quite some time. A plurality of Floridians and U.S. voters in 2008 described themselves as moderate. (See Table 13.)

In 2008, the voting patterns of the different ideological groups were virtually identical at both the national and state levels. (See Table 14.) Liberals heavily supported Obama, moderates also favored Obama although not by as large a margin, and McCain was the clear favorite of conservatives.

<sup>3</sup> Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life. *The U.S. Religious Landscape Survey, 2008.*

**Table 13. Share of the Electorate by Ideology**

		Florida	National
Ideology	Liberal	19	22
	Moderate	47	44
	Conservative	35	34

Source: Presidential exit polls.

**Table 14. Voting Patterns by Ideology**

	Florida			National		
	Obama	McCain	Other	Obama	McCain	Other
Liberal	91	8	1	89	10	1
Moderate	57	41	2	60	39	1
Conservative	21	77	2	20	78	2

Source: Presidential exit polls.

## POLITICAL PARTY IDENTIFICATION

With the similarities in the socioeconomic composition of the U.S. and Florida electorates, it was not surprising that the partisan makeup of the two groups was highly similar in 2008. (See Table 15.) That said, it was true that Florida was slightly more competitive from a partisan perspective, reflective of its battleground state status.

It all adds up to the fact that Florida's voting patterns by party were virtually identical to national patterns. (See Table 16.) High proportions of Democrats at both levels voted for Obama, Republicans for McCain. Independents were less cohesive, but a majority of each electorate supported Obama.

**Table 15. Share of the Electorate by Party**

		Florida	National
Party ID	Democrat	37	39
	Republican	34	32
	Independent	29	29

Source: Presidential exit polls.

**Table 16. Voting Patterns by Party**

	Florida			National		
	Obama	McCain	Other	Obama	McCain	Other
Democrat	87	12	1	89	10	1
Republican	12	87	1	9	90	1
Independent	52	45	3	52	44	4

Source: Presidential exit polls.

## **BELLWETHER STATE, YES!!**

In summary, Florida's status as a bellwether state was strengthened in the 2008 presidential election cycle. If anything, it increased its stature as a mirror-image of the nation which is why it continues to be in the national spotlight.