

Southern Politics: Swing Voters, Jesse Helms and Tax Hikes

As the November election nears, three perennial topics in Southern politics have reappeared: swing voters, former U.S. Sen. Jesse Helms and tax hikes.

1. Swing Voters

Presidential candidates probably will encounter fewer “swing voters” in the South than in the battleground states of the East and Midwest. This is among the findings drawn from a report issued last week by the Pew Research Center for the People and the Press (www.people-press.org). The report defined swing voters as registered voters who are undecided or who say they could change their mind.

The Pew survey finds “considerably fewer swing voters now than at this point in the previous three presidential campaigns”: 21 percent of registered voters, down from 32 percent at this point in the 2000 race.

Among Southerners, 19 percent of voters classify themselves as undecided or open to a change of mind. Such swing voters represent 24 percent of the electorate in the East, 23 percent in the Midwest and 20 percent in the West (see table). Given the margins of error in national polls, these results suggest rather narrow regional differences, though they point to the South as the region where a somewhat larger share of voters have fixed views on the presidential candidates.

Region	Certain Bush (%)	Certain Kerry (%)	Swing (%)
East	30	46	24
Midwest	39	38	23
South	47	34	19
West	39	41	20

Source: Pew Research Center, June 2004.

In the South, the 19 percent of swing voters represents a dramatic decline from the 30 percent of such voters in May 1992.

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While most voters may have made up their mind already in the presidential race, election analyst Rhodes Cook finds a significant rise in Americans who identify themselves as unaffiliated, rather than as a Democrat or Republican. Cook explores this phenomenon in the Outlook section of *The Washington Post* on June 26, 2004 (www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/articles/A7329-2004Jun26.html).

2. Sen. Jesse Helms

Bill Clinton is not the only veteran former elected official who has been working on memoirs. Former U.S. Sen. Jesse Helms of North Carolina has told journalist Ned Cline that he has a book in the works, writing it on an old manual typewriter. Writing in *Business North Carolina*, Cline reports that Helms has a contract with Random House for 50,000 copies. The interview took place before the former senator’s month-long hospitalization for inflammation of the pancreas.

Among the observations that Cline drew from Helms is that, while he considers President Bush right in going to war in Iraq, he views the Bush tax cuts as misguided policy.

“I would not have voted for the tax cut, based on what I know,” Helms said. “I think he was eager for attention, so the fellow down at the pool hall could say, ‘Boy, that fellow has guts.’ There is no doubt that the people at the top who need a tax break the least will get the most benefit. I think he just wanted to show he had guts to do something. Too often presidents do things that don’t end up helping the people they should be helping, and their staffs won’t tell them their actions stink on ice. You know, not too many people will criticize a tax cut, but it’s going to be costly.”

The complete magazine article can be found at www.businessnc.com/archives/2004/03/capital.html.

3. Taxes

Virginia’s enactment of a tax-increase package designed to raise \$1.4 billion in tax revenue over two years ranks as one of the most significant political and policy developments in the South this year. Passage came as a result of an initiative of Democratic Gov. Mark Warner who was joined in advocating tax increases to offset a budget slump by moderate Republican legislators.

The National Association of State Budget Officers reports that 26 governors have recommended tax and fee increases totaling \$5.4 billion for the 2005 fiscal year, while four governors have recommended tax cuts.

Several states in the South have raised cigarette taxes this year and last. In addition to Virginia, which had a tobacco tax increase as part of its package, both Alabama (up 26 cents per pack) and Georgia (up 25 cents per pack) raised the cigarette tax.

For NASBO’s most recent Fiscal Survey of the States, see <http://nasbo.org>.

Also, for a look at state budget developments with an emphasis on the South, see Tom Baxter’s account in *The Atlanta Journal-Constitution* on June 28, 2004.

(http://www.ajc.com/today/content/epaper/editions/today/news_04fdcbd745b5524c0008.html).

Of Interest

David Lublin, associate professor of government at American University, has published *The Republican South: Democratization and Partisan Change* (Princeton, 2004). The book explores why it took the Democrats so long to lose the South and why they eventually lost it. The book focuses on the role of elected Democratic officials intent on retaining power, as well as on racial and economic concerns.

Al Stuart, professor emeritus of geography and earth sciences at UNC-Charlotte, has published another online supplement to *The North Carolina Atlas* (University of North Carolina, 2000). The latest supplement focuses on the religious composition of North Carolina. Visit the atlas at www.ncatlasrevisited.org