

THE FLORIDA VOTER, A REGIONAL ANALYSIS¹

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Florida is often depicted as having deep regional political cleavages. The northern part of the state is thought of as largely rural and traditional, still rooted in the culture of the Old South. The central and southern parts are seen as urban and increasingly liberal, particularly on social and environmental issues. Florida politics, especially during annual sessions of the State Legislature, is interpreted as a struggle between the rural north and the urban south over the direction of public policy. This article presents a preliminary analysis of data from a statewide survey of Florida voters on a number of issues.

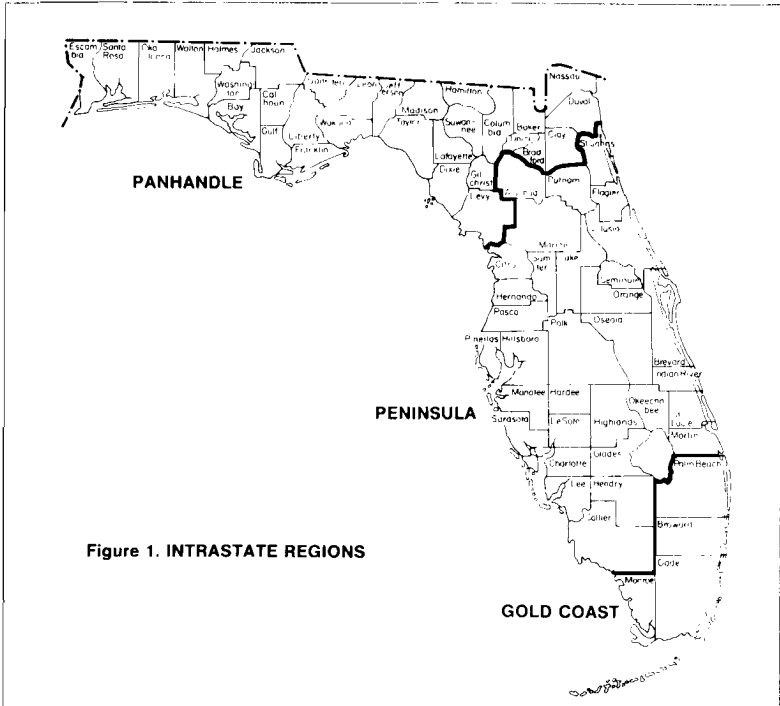


Figure 1. INTRASTATE REGIONS

Sampling Procedures

The survey was conducted by the Social Science Research Laboratory at Florida Atlantic University. Funding was provided by the Florida Institute of Government and the Florida Atlantic University/Florida International University Joint Center for Environmental and Urban Problems. Computer assisted telephone interviews were conducted with 890 residents whose phone numbers were selected at random. The sample was constructed so that three regions within the state--the Panhandle, the Peninsula, and the Gold Coast--had roughly the same number of respondents. Regional boundaries were chosen by the authors and reflect historical regional divisions in the state (Fig. 1). The distribution of public

opinion for the state as a whole was calculated by weighting the regional distributions according to each region's share of the state's population. The interval of error for statewide distributions is 3.5 percent at a .95 level of confidence. The interval of error for distributions by regions is 6 percent, again at a .95 level of confidence. The survey was run between October and December, 1984. (For further details on the sampling procedure, see deHaven-Smith and Gatlin 1985, p. 15.)

Table 1. VOTING BEHAVIOR AND ATTITUDES

	PANHANDLE	PENINSULA	GOLD COAST	STATE
PRESIDENTIAL VOTE, 1980				
CARTER	46%	37%	34%	38%
REAGAN	49	58	54	55
OTHER	2	2	5	3
PRESIDENTIAL VOTE, 1984				
MONDALE	33	27	28	29
REAGAN	62	68	64	65
OTHER	0	1	1	1
CONGRESSIONAL VOTE, 1984				
DEMOCRAT	58	42	48	47
REPUBLICAN	29	49	41	43
DON'T KNOW	13	9	11	10
STATE & LOCAL VOTE, 1984				
MAINLY DEMOCRAT	39	23	26	27
MAINLY REPUBLICAN	11	27	25	23
SOME FROM BOTH PARTIES	48	46	45	46
PARTY IDENTIFICATION				
REPUBLICAN	26	41	37	37
DEMOCRAT	38	26	29	29
INDEPENDENT	27	23	24	24
OTHER	2	1	1	1
NO PREFERENCE	5	7	7	6
IDEOLOGICAL IDENTIFICATION				
LIBERAL	13	14	17	15
MODERATE	39	37	41	38
CONSERVATIVE	33	41	31	36
OTHER	3	2	3	2
REGISTERED AS				
REPUBLICAN	21	42	37	36
DEMOCRAT	71	51	52	55
OTHER PARTY	1	0	2	1
NO PARTY	5	6	7	6

All figures are percentages. Columns may not add to 100% because undecided, don't know, and similar responses are not shown.

Voting Behavior

The strongest regional difference in the political orientation of Florida voters is in their attachments to the political parties, but even these differences are much more complex than the prevailing view of Florida politics suggests. Table 1 shows the distribution of responses on a number of questions about voting behavior. The important point here is that attachments to the political parties vary depending on the level of government in question. Although the majority of Florida voters (55 percent of the sample) are registered Democrats, this orientation applies mainly to voting behavior in elections for the U.S. Congress. Forty-seven percent of the respondents voted for the Democratic candidate for Congress in the 1984 election. In contrast, Florida voters are decidedly Republican in Presidential elections and Independent in state and local elections. Hence, while often registered as Democrats, Florida voters frequently identify themselves as Independents.

Because party attachments vary by level of government, partisan cleavages between regions also vary by level. In voting for the U.S. Congress, the Panhandle and Gold Coast coalesced in support of the Democratic Party while the Peninsula stood alone behind the Republicans. However, in state and local elections, the Gold Coast switched sides. Voters in the Peninsula and Gold Coast were more likely than voters in the Panhandle to vote mainly for Republicans, and voters in the Panhandle were more likely than voters in the other regions to vote mainly for Democrats. Finally, in the most recent Presidential election, the state was united. About two-thirds of the voters in each of the three regions supported President Reagan.

Table 2. PERCEPTIONS OF STATE AND NATIONAL GOVERNMENT

	PANHANDLE	PENINSULA	GOLD COAST	STATE
TRUST THE NATIONAL GOVT.				
ALWAYS	4%	5%	5%	5%
MOST OF THE TIME	39	35	39	37
SOME/NONE	52	54	52	53
TRUST THE STATE GOVT.				
ALWAYS	8	9	5	7
MOST OF THE TIME	47	42	43	43
SOME/NONE	37	38	44	40
NATIONAL GOVT. IS RUN FOR A FEW BIG INTERESTS				
ALL OF THE PEOPLE	44	42	43	43
STATE GOVT. IS RUN FOR A FEW BIG INTERESTS	43	45	45	45
THE NATIONAL GOVT. WASTES A LOT OF MONEY				
WASTES SOME	24	26	31	27
DOESN'T WASTE MUCH	59	55	53	55
THE STATE GOVT. WASTES A LOT OF MONEY				
WASTES SOME	29	28	29	29
DOESN'T WASTE MUCH	45	44	47	45
	12	12	11	12

All figures are percentages. Columns may not add to 100% because undecided, don't know, and similar responses are not shown.

Table 3. ATTITUDES ON SOCIAL ISSUES

	PANHANDLE	PENINSULA	GOLD COAST	STATE
STATE GOVT. SHOULD OR SHOULD NOT DO THE FOLLOWING				
SUPPORT THE ERA				
SHOULD	55%	58%	65%	60%
SHOULD NOT	29	29	25	28
PROVIDE WELFARE				
SHOULD	49	45	45	46
SHOULD NOT	14	16	23	18
SPEND MORE ON EDUCATION				
SHOULD	84	83	88	85
SHOULD NOT	8	7	6	7
BUS TO INTEGRATE SCHOOLS				
SHOULD	44	44	42	43
SHOULD NOT	38	39	40	39
REDUCE TAXES EVEN IF PROGRAMS ARE CUT				
SHOULD	8	6	9	7
SHOULD NOT	77	81	81	80

All figures are percentages. Columns may not add to 100% because undecided, don't know, and similar responses are not shown.

Overall, the Panhandle is more solidly Democratic than the other regions, the Peninsula is more Republican, and the Gold Coast falls in the middle, siding with the Panhandle in Congressional elections and with the Peninsula in state and local elections.

Perceptions of Government

Florida voters have a much more favorable impression of the state government than the national government regardless of the region in which they live. Table 2 shows the distribution of public opinion on questions designed to measure perceptions of government. Respondents had greater trust in the state government than in the national government, were more likely to think that the state government is run for all of the people rather than a few big interests, and less often thought that the state government wastes a lot of money.

Regional variation in perceptions is focused on the first two issues and only at the state level. Respondents in the Gold Coast were slightly more likely than those in the Peninsula and Panhandle to distrust the state government and to think that it is run for a few interests rather than for the Florida public generally.

Social Issues

Attitudes on social issues are similar in all of regions. Table 3 displays the distribution of opinion on state policy towards welfare, education, the Equal Rights Amendment (ERA), busing and taxes. Respondents overwhelmingly support expenditure increases for education and oppose tax cuts if they would require reductions in social programs. By a smaller margin they support the ERA and welfare for the unemployed. Respondents were divided on the issue of busing black and white children to the same schools. The only regional difference that stands out is on the ERA; support increases steadily as one moves south.

Growth Management

If there is one area of public opinion where stark regional differences would be expected, it is the area of growth management. After all, most of the state's rapid population growth is concentrated in the Peninsula and Gold Coast. Table 4 shows the distribution of opinion on a number of growth management questions.

Table 4. ATTITUDES ON GROWTH MANAGEMENT ISSUES

	PANHANDLE	PENINSULA	GOLD COAST	STATE
FLA'S ENVIRONMENT IS				
GETTING BETTER	26%	18%	15%	19%
GETTING WORSE	43	57	54	53
NOT CHANGING	28	21	27	25
LAND-USE REGULATION SHOULD BE				
RELAXED	5	5	7	6
STRENGTHENED	51	57	55	55
LEFT AS IS	31	23	23	24
FLA NEEDS STRONGER LAWS TO PREVENT POLLUTION				
AGREE	84	82	86	84
DISAGREE	8	8	7	8
FLA NEEDS STRONG LAWS TO PROTECT FISH AND WILDLIFE				
AGREE	87	91	89	90
DISAGREE	4	3	6	4
WATER CONSERVATION IS NOT NEEDED IN FLA:				
AGREE	9	7	4	6
DISAGREE	78	82	88	83
WE NEED ECONOMIC GROWTH EVEN IF IT HURTS THE ENVIRONMENT				
AGREE	11	12	11	11
DISAGREE	81	79	79	79

All figures are percentages. Columns may not add to 100% because undecided, don't know, and similar responses are not shown

Overall, the Florida public is strongly supportive of the state's efforts to protect the environment and quality of life. The majority of respondents said that the natural environment is deteriorating and that land-use regulation should be strengthened. Respondents overwhelmingly supported stronger laws to prevent pollution and protect fish and wildlife from the hazards of construction, said that regulations for water conservation are needed, and opposed economic growth if it means the environment will suffer.

The only regional variation in attitudes on these growth management issues is of degree, not direction. Respondents in the Gold Coast and Peninsula were more likely than those in the Panhandle to believe that Florida's environment is getting worse, that land-use regulation should be strengthened, and that water needs to be conserved. However, as shown in Table 4, support for land-

use controls and environmental protection is also very strong in the Panhandle, certainly much, much stronger than prevailing analyses of the Florida public assume.

Conclusion

Given that there is little evidence of regional divisions in Florida public opinion, it is worth asking why the State Legislature seems so often embroiled in conflicts between the urban south and rural north. The plausible answer is that regional conflicts in the Legislature have less to do with the substance of policy than with the geographic distribution of public goods. For example, the Legislature may agree fully that increases are needed in spending for higher education but disagree about whether monies should go to universities in the south rather than in the north.

Whatever the reason for regional cleavages in the State Legislature, the policy implications of this survey are clear. The Florida public wants stronger laws for managing growth and protecting the environment, supports increased spending for education, and opposes tax cuts if they require reductions in social services.

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1. This article was reprinted, with minor revisions, from deHaven-Smith and Gatlin (1985) with the permission of the Florida Atlantic University/Florida International University Joint Center for Environmental and Urban Problems.

References

deHaven-Smith, Lance, and Gatlin, Douglas. 1985. The Florida Voter. Florida Environmental and Urban Issues. (April): 14-18.

