

Divided We Stand

by Swanee Hunt, Scripps Howard News Service, November 10, 2004

Red versus blue. Coastal versus inland. Urban versus rural. Once again, we've weathered a divisive presidential election where we begin to doubt how we can call ourselves the United anything. There's something about how the blue and red states broke down on election night that's downright scary. It makes you think differently about the country. Makes you look askance at neighbors north, south, east, or west.

These red and blue maps are misleading. Varying shades of purple would be a more accurate representation. Bush and Kerry were separated by seven points or less in sixteen states. These are spread out along the coasts and well into the heartland: from Washington to Florida, New Mexico to New Hampshire. Six states had a margin of 2 points or less.

Starting to feel better already? I suggest you visit BoingBoing.net and print out the purple election map done by graphic designer Joe Culver. Hang it on your bulletin board or your refrigerator door. You can look at it every time pundits write about our neatly divided nation and know that they're wrong.

No matter how you felt about the outcome, there were wonderful successes in this election and much that should bring us hope. Early fears of apathy were well-founded, but more than 12 million people voted for the first time. Hopefully they'll be lifers. The youth vote accounted for nearly 21 million of all ballots cast. Their turnout, or the percentage of Americans age 18-29 who voted, beat the last election by nine points and even beat numbers from 1992, the last time the youth vote spiked in what has been a general decline for 30 years. There were countless anecdotes of students, with papers to write and exams to study for, waiting in line for hours so they could vote.

Despite the record turnout by young Americans, their percentage of the overall vote stayed about the same as in 2000. Which means nearly all demographics showed up to the polls in record numbers. In all, more than 120 million votes were cast, or almost 60% of those eligible. That's five points better than the prior presidential election.

In the end, conventional wisdom may have prevailed. It did all come down to Ohio, Pennsylvania, and Florida, just like everyone said it would. But there was nothing conventional about the spirit, passion, and commitment this election brought out in people who've never before so much as sported a bumper sticker or button, never mind traveled to a swing state to mobilize voters. Moveon.org alone got 400,000 new voters to the polls, ushered by more than 50,000 volunteers. The Republicans did an even better job of recruiting and motivating their voters. You can bet the leaders of both parties will be working round the clock to come up with ways to keep these newfound enthusiasts interested and engaged.

We can count on Bush and company to keep our progressive juices pumping as they claim that their victory is a mandate for socially conservative policies. Don't you believe it. In fact, an election-day poll sponsored by the Institute for America's Future shows the majority of Americans believe otherwise. By a healthy 17 points, those polled think Social Security should be preserved at current levels and not privatized, as President Bush prefers. Fully 68% support federal funding of stem cell research. And respondents also consider homosexuality a way of life that should be accepted by society, not discouraged. A seven-point margin there. This was no liberal-leaning poll. Rather, its respondents were 51% for Bush vs. 48% for Kerry, mirroring the national election results.

It's important that Bush and his advisors remember this. It's time for the president to unite us as he promised during the 2000 election. He must finally become the "compassionate conservative" he called himself and tackle issues we all care about whether we identify ourselves as red, blue, or purple. Those issues are education, healthcare, and Social Security. There's no doubt that the president is enjoying his popular vote victory. Will he take this support and become more imperious, or more noble? Let's hope it's the latter.