

**JANUARY 12**

# Dixie trap for Democrats in Presidential race

**M**any pundits say President Bush is sitting pretty, but this year began with new poll data telling a very different story. A national Harris survey, completed on Jan. 1 for Time magazine and CNN, found that just 51 percent of respondents said they were "likely" to vote for Bush in November, compared to 46 percent "unlikely." When people were asked to "choose between Howard Dean, the Democrat, and George W. Bush, the Republican," the margin for Bush was only 51-43, and when the survey focused on "likely voters" the gap narrowed to 51-46.

While other polls have some different numbers, clearly the race for the White House could be quite close. But one of the obstacles to Democratic success is the pretense of having a chance to carry a bunch of Southern states. Actually, for a Democratic presidential campaign in 2004 – in terms of money, travel time, rhetoric and espoused ideology – Dixie is a sinkhole.

In 2000, the Bush-Cheney campaign swept all of the South, albeit with electoral thievery in Florida.

The percentage margins were double-digit in Alabama, Georgia, Kentucky, Mississippi, North Carolina, South Carolina and Texas. But leading Democrats show no signs of acknowledging what ought to be self-evident: They should not exert their presidential campaign to troll for electoral votes in such states any more than the Bush team will push to win in Massachusetts or Hawaii.

During the Jan. 4 debate in Iowa, responding to a question about how he plans to "reach out" to "particularly white Southern voters who no longer even consider Democratic candidates," Sen. John Kerry offered patriotic-sounding flourishes. "I am a veteran," he said. "I've fought in a war. They particularly respect service to country in the South."

Then Kerry added a real doozy: "And in the end, if I'm the nominee, I could always pick a running mate from the South, and we'll do just fine."

But in 2000, even with a Southerner at the top, the Democratic ticket did not get a single electoral vote from the South. So this year, in the South, how could a ticket

headed by Kerry "do just fine"?

Such posturing is partly a charade for the primary season. Several Democratic candidates are concentrating appreciable resources on the South Carolina primary, for instance, because they could win some early delegates there. Yet, come November, the likelihood of South Carolina's electoral votes going to the Democratic ticket is on a par with the chances that Laura Bush will publicly express a fervent desire to marry Dennis Kucinich.

At the risk of riling some political journalists, the Democrats should stop kidding themselves about the South in this year's presidential campaign. "The 2000 election left us with a map split between blue states and red states," Joe Velasquez and Steve Cobble write in the Jan. 5 edition of *The Nation* magazine. "The conventional wisdom is that a Northern nominee, to win, will have to find a way to convert some of the old Confederate gray from red to blue. But most Southern states are burial grounds for Northern Democrats, not battlegrounds."

Velasquez and Cobble make a persuasive case. "For almost 40 years now," they point out, "the white South has been moving steadily into the Republican ranks. Indeed, white Southerners now run the GOP and provide a very high proportion of its cultural shock troops. Given these facts, we believe it's past time to target the electoral map in a different way. The new path to the White House runs through the Latino Southwest, not the former Confederacy, especially for a Northern nominee. Hope blooms as a cactus flower, not a magnolia blossom."

Longtime progressive electoral strategists, Velasquez and Cobble single out three states with booming Latino populations – Arizona, Nevada and Colorado – carried by Bush in 2000 but within striking distance for the Democratic ticket in 2004. Also, they note, New Mexico was "essentially a dead heat" won by Al Gore.

"When considering the Latino vote," they write, "reflect on this potentially empowering statistic: There are as many unregistered Latinos who are American citizens as there were Latino voters in 2000 – more than 5.5 million. These potential voters are not likely Bush voters, despite Republican rhetoric."

According to Velasquez and Cobble, "re-defeating George W. Bush in 2004 hinges on holding blue states on both coasts, making gains in the Midwest from West Virginia through Ohio to Missouri and adding New Hampshire – and registering and mobilizing massive numbers of Latino voters in the Southwest and Florida." They conclude: "Mobilizing the fast-rising Southwestern Latino population around the same progressive economic issues that can also unite poor whites and African-Americans is the ticket to ride in 2004."

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The notion of carrying several Southern states is often encouraged by media pundits eager for a more "moderate" Democratic standard bearer. But the Dixie trip is a dead end. And a fixation on the conservative sensibilities of white Southerners is apt to tilt the ticket away from the kind of political message that could resonate sufficiently elsewhere to mean victory. ●