

The Honky Tonk Gap: Country Music, Red State Identity, and the Election of 2004

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January 6, 2005

In the wake of President Bush's re-election, observers of the American political scene, many writing in these pages, have offered up their takes on the meaning and significance of the November 2 balloting. Most have referred to the famous "red state"/"blue state" divide (if only to argue against the construct), but surprisingly few have explored the fundamental question: what, if anything, distinguishes red states from blue states, apart from the tautological fact that majorities of voters in these states voted for Bush and Kerry, respectively? Some analysts have posited what they term a "values gap" or "God gap" between the red and blue states, but few have offered a plausible explanation for this gap, assuming it exists. And no one, to my knowledge, has posed what would seem to be an obvious question in the context of a political campaign: is there something about red states and blue states *as communications environments* that causes voters in these regions to respond differently to presidential campaign communication?

I have a theory that I believe answers all three questions: there exists in the United States a "honky tonk gap" -- a stark red/blue disparity in the penetration of country music radio -- that demarcates the red and blue territories with remarkable precision; explains, at least in part, the voting preference and values gaps (and a number of issue gaps) between the two regions; and gives rise to distinct communications environments that tend to favor one presidential candidate over the other. More specifically, in the course of election 2004, country music radio -- far more than even the richest 527 group -- inculcated and reinforced conservative values in the red state electorate, helped frame the issues of the day on terms favorable to the conservative position on those issues, and primed red state voters to respond positively to President Bush's basic campaign message of family, country, and God. To its credit, President Bush's campaign team was acutely aware of this dynamic, gave it full play, and rode it all the way to a second term in the White House.

I recently put my idea to the test by analyzing three authoritative, and non-partisan, data sets: the official 2004 election results, the U.S. Census 2000, and Radio-Locator's comprehensive listing by state of country music radio stations in the United States (formerly, the "MIT List of Radio Stations").

First, the big picture: According to the census data, the projected population of the United States in 2003 was just over 290 million; according to the Radio-Locator data, there are now 2,088 country music stations operating in the United States (far more, incidentally, than any other single radio format).

Breaking down the country music radio station data by state, and then cross-checking that data with the 2004 election results, I began to see a fascinating correlation emerge. In the

20 states (including the District of Columbia) that Kerry won (the blue states), which account for a population of about 141 million Americans, there were a total of 508 country music radio stations. In the 31 states that Bush won (the red states), which account for a population of about 150 million Americans, there were a total of 1,580 stations -- more than triple the number than in the blue states. Organizing the data by state, I found that the average blue state, with a population of over 7 million, was home to just 25.4 country music radio stations, while the average red state, with a population of only about 4.8 million, was home to 51 country music radio stations -- fully twice the blue state figure, notwithstanding the considerably smaller population.

To derive the relative "density" of country music radio in red and blue states, I divided the cumulative populations of the red states and blue states by the number of country music radio stations in those areas. Across the whole country, the average density was one country music radio station per 139,277 people. In blue states, there was one country music radio station for every 277,535 people, about half the average national density. But in red states, there was one country music radio station for every 94,824 people, a density well above the national norm. Comparing the figures for the red and blue states, country music radio station density, on a per capita basis, was about three-times higher in the red states than in the blue states. Few, if any, other measurable ways of evaluating the distinction between the red and blue regions (e.g., by the states' ethnic or gender compositions, income and education levels, etc.) yield such a dramatic cleavage.

I then broke the data down even further, producing density figures for each state. Once again, the results were eye-opening. Not only was there a consistent overall correlation between the state's country music radio density and its choice for president, but indeed, there was also a good correlation between density and the winner's margin of victory. In other words, on the whole, Kerry won by the greatest margin in those states in which there were the fewest country music radio stations per capita (e.g., New Jersey, Connecticut, Massachusetts, California, New York, et al). By the same token, Bush won most handily, on the whole, in those states with the greatest number of country stations per capita (e.g., Wyoming, North Dakota, South Dakota, Montana, Alaska, et al). More specifically, Kerry won by an average margin of nearly 20 percentage points (e.g., 60:40) in the ten blue states that had the fewest country music radio stations, but by just 5 points in the ten blue states that had relatively higher country music radio station penetration. The same is true for Bush, but in reverse: he scored his narrowest victories (12 points, on average) in the ten red states with relatively low numbers of country music radio stations, somewhat larger victories (14 points) in the ten red states with middling density figures, and significantly more lopsided victories (24 points) in the eleven red states with the highest country music radio density. If there is another indicator, socio-economic or otherwise, that tracks so closely, on a state by state basis, with both electoral outcome and margin of victory, I am unaware of it. (Church attendance may be close, but I don't think anyone has yet crunched the numbers in the necessary detail.)

What's more, Kerry won no state in which the ratio of country music radio stations to people was greater than 1:61,911 (while Bush won fourteen), and Bush won no state in which the ratio was less than 1:293,432 (while Kerry won nine). Notably, virtually all

the swing states -- Ohio, Florida, Pennsylvania, Michigan, Wisconsin and a dozen others -- fell in between these two figures, effectively, in the "swing" territory of country music radio density. Going back to the national average of one country music station for every 139,277 people in the country, we can compare the records of the two candidates. For Kerry, 15 of his 20 electoral victories came in states with below-average country music radio density, and only 5 came in states with above-average density. For Bush, the opposite was true: 25 of his 31 wins came in states with above-average density, and only 6 came in states with below-average density. And again, of the 11 states for which the results bucked the dominant trend, most were fiercely contested swing states, including Ohio, Florida, Wisconsin, Minnesota, and Nevada -- none of which were won by more than 4 percentage points -- among others. It is almost as if the very definition of a swing state is a state that defies the logic (if that's the right term) of the honky tonk gap.

To take all this and put it another way: if you were to overlay a map of the current country music fan base onto the iconic red-and-blue map of the United States, you would find that its contours coincide virtually identically with those of the red state region, probably right down to the county level. (And though it goes beyond the scope of this article, you would also find that this is true over time: the dramatic growth of country music radio, as measured by the increase in the number of stations, and the national ascendancy of the Republican Party, as measured by the size of its House and Senate delegations, have seemingly occurred in virtual lockstep from the 1960s to the present.)

That there is a strong correlation between country music penetration (as measured by the number of radio stations in the state) and electoral outcome in 2004 -- and, in large measure, 2000, as well, as the red/blue divide was virtually identical in that year -- is plain to see. The numbers don't lie. This correlation naturally gives rise to the question of causality: might the relative levels of country music penetration in red and blue states actually help *explain* the voters' presidential choices and the purported values gap, and if so, how? The answers to these questions are to be found in the lyrical content of contemporary country music.

Most people who don't listen to country music -- and I suspect few inside-the-Beltway pundits do -- tend to dismiss it as goofy, provincial, and devoid of serious meaning. Their conception of country music remains stuck in the 1960s or 70s, when the music was, in fact, far simpler (and when, as noted above, there were just a few score or few hundred country music radio stations in the entire country commanding a small fraction of the current audience). Those who don't listen to today's country music fail to recognize the degree to which the format has grown and matured musically, lyrically, and, above all, thematically (especially since the late 1980s, when Garth Brooks and the "New Country" movement stormed onto the scene). Today's country music -- the music that an estimated 50 million listeners tune in to for about three hours a day on average, according to the industry's leading market research firms -- is very different from that of yesteryear. Leaving aside the age-old theme of love, the staple of every popular music format (including country), contemporary country music now concerns itself, far more

than any other popular format, with values, and in particular, the values of family, patriotism, and religious devotion.

An analysis of "American Country Countdown's" year-end listings of the fifty most frequently played songs bears this out. (ACC's lists are the widely recognized standard for measuring the popularity of, and airtime devoted to, country music tracks.) For purposes of testing my hypothesis about country music's reinforcing impact on the voting preferences and values of red state voters, I analyzed the lyrics of the fifty most popular country songs of the years 2000 through 2004, a period coinciding exactly with Bush's ascendancy to national office and his first term in the White House. Collectively, these 250 songs accounted for well over half the prime-time (e.g. rush-hour, evening, and request show) programming of most country stations during this period; that is, these were the songs tens of millions of country music fans heard again and again, day in, day out.

About twenty percent of the top fifty country hits each year dealt with, or contained substantive reference to, the importance of traditional family bonds. (I do not include here the many songs about romantic relationships; "family," in this context, refers to blood bonds, not romantic ties.) Among the most prevalent sub-themes during this period were: teens carrying pregnancies to term and being glad they did; parents expressing their boundless love for their children (and vice versa); parents instilling "old-fashioned" values in their children; and parents marveling at how their children grow and mature into adults. (Marital fidelity was also a major sub-theme, albeit one pertaining to romantic, not blood, ties; it is telling in itself, however, that so many of the love songs in this data set centered around marriage.)

An average of about three of the top fifty country hits each year addressed overtly patriotic themes; often, these songs were in the top ten. Among the most prevalent sub-themes here were: 9/11; the sacrifice of American soldiers in the cause of the war on terror and the war in Iraq; love of, and willingness to fight for, the enduring principles for which the United States stands; and the sanctity of the American flag. (In this context, it bears mentioning that many country music stations, including Washington's WMZQ, play the National Anthem daily and convey taped greetings from the troops in Iraq and Afghanistan regularly; and some of country music's biggest acts, such as the wildly popular duo Brooks and Dunn, feature and honor military personnel at their concerts.)

Perhaps most strikingly, nearly thirty percent of the top fifty songs each year focused directly on religious experience or moral parables, or otherwise featured substantive religious metaphors and language, including explicit references to God, Jesus, the Lord, and the Bible; well over one-third of the top fifty songs in each of these years contained at least a passing reference to the Almighty or to overtly religious terminology. Among the key sub-themes were: the sovereignty of God/Jesus; appreciation for God's many blessings; the importance, and joy, of attending church; and learning/knowing the difference between right and wrong. (At Christmastime, references to the Almighty spiked sharply, to near-constancy, owing to the virtually non-stop airplay of country-style Christmas music.)

And interwoven through all these themes, in song after song, was an intense nostalgia for a simpler time. Rascal Flatts' "Mayberry" and Tim McGraw's "Back When," both 2004 number-one hits, typified this underlying sentiment with simple eloquence, respectively: "I miss Mayberry / Sittin' on the porch drinking ice-cold cherry Coke / When everything was black and white"; and, "We got too complicated / It's all way overrated / I like the old and outdated way of life." In a similar vein, two other big 2004 hits hearkened back, with great sentimentality, to that most quintessential of American experiences, "Sunday chicken after church."

Overall, roughly half of the 250 top country songs from 2000 through 2004 articulated one or the other of these powerful themes, and many of these songs articulated more than one (e.g., thanking God for the blessings of family and country). Thus, the average country music listener -- who, according to extensive market research data, is almost always white; slightly more likely to be female than male; more often than not married with kids; generally of moderate means; and disproportionately a resident of the suburbs, exurbs, or countryside of a red state -- was getting a steady diet, perhaps an hour-a-day's worth, of family, country and God, seasoned with plenty of nostalgia, as the 2004 presidential campaign unfolded.

Against this backdrop, the existence of red/blue voting preference and values gaps -- though not to be overstated, especially considering the very slim margins of victory in some states -- should not surprise anyone. On the contrary, given country music's highly skewed geographic distribution and its overwhelmingly conservative message, and given also what we know from advertising and political communication theory about the grinding efficacy of repetitive communication, I, for one, would be greatly surprised if there weren't such gaps. The discipline of political communication, after all, is predicated on the notion that people who are repeatedly exposed to a consistent media message will tend to vote and think differently from those who weren't exposed to it.

In light of all the above, is it any wonder that Bush' views were, on the whole, better received in the red "honky tonk states" than in the blue? The much heavier presence of country music radio in the red states, coupled with the innately conservative message of the music, worked to the advantage of the candidate who, in his west Texas accent, advocated traditional marriage; extolled the importance of family; summoned the memory of 9/11; defended the rectitude of the war in Iraq and the U.S. approach to the war on terror; welcomed greater religiosity in American life and celebrated it in his own; and, in a subtle but nonetheless palpable way, called forth that almost mystical era in American life when things were simpler and people "still knew wrong from right." In all these regards, country music's message tracked perfectly with Bush's campaign message, and the net effect of the former was to validate, amplify, reinforce, and prime red state voters for the latter.

For its part, the Bush campaign team recognized the power of country music as a political communication device and spared no effort to make it clear to country music fans -- who

effectively constituted his primary target audience in the campaign, albeit under the labels "security moms" and "NASCAR dads" -- that he "got it," that he spoke their language and understood and embraced their values.

In 2004, as in 2000, the Bush/Cheney campaign chose a rousing country song by Brooks and Dunn as its official campaign theme. In 2004, it was the patriotic hit, "Only in America"; in 2000, it had been the duo's up-beat ode to working-class values, "Hard Working Man." No doubt, these songs flew beneath the radar of the Washington commentariat -- not one pundit, to my knowledge, made mention of them at the times -- but were unmistakable, welcome, and reassuring signals to the millions of predominantly red state voters who recognized them instantly at the convention and at the hundreds of Bush/Cheney campaign events across the country at which they were played.

Moreover, at the 2004 Republican National Convention, the Bush/Cheney campaign featured -- in prime-time -- a slew of major country music acts, including Brooks and Dunn, who had also performed at the 2000 convention; Darryl Worley, whose 2003 hit, "Have You Forgotten?," mentioned Bin Laden by name and called on Americans to remember 9/11 and support the war effort; and Lee Ann Womack, who performed her huge 2000 hit, "I Hope You Dance," an inspirational ballad in which God and heaven figure prominently; as well as Larry Gatlin (reportedly, one of at least two country artists to spend a night in this White House); Lee Greenwood (of "God Bless the U.S.A." fame); and many others.

And this is to say nothing of the President's frequent employment of other potent country symbols, including his Crawford ranch, pick-up truck, western-style belt and boots, and even his "Texas swagger" (to which Bush humorously, but not incidentally, called attention in his 2004 convention acceptance speech). Rarely if ever in the modern history of the presidential campaign has a candidate made such an obvious and concerted effort to establish and highlight his country credentials.

So there you have it: Contemporary country music, with its updated sound and greater-than-ever appeal and accessibility to the tens of millions of listeners it reaches daily, has codified and popularized traditional American values such as family, patriotism and religious devotion; crystallized a common, and predominantly rural, identity rooted in these core values that stretches across "red state country" -- where the vast majority of country music radio stations are concentrated -- from the farms and small towns of Virginia and Florida to those of Arizona and Idaho; and, as a result of the above, reinforced the tendency in recent years of white exurban and rural voters -- the core of the New Country fan base and an important segment of the new Republican base -- to vote their conservative values in lieu of their presumed populist/liberal economic interests. And Bush and his team comprehended this dynamic and exploited it masterfully.

And yet, in a larger sense, election 2004 was less about values than it was about identity. Bush's values alone could not have, and did not, propel him to a second term as president. Most Americans, including many red state voters who supported Bush, do not share the

president's particular views on homosexuality, abortion, and stem cell research, among other issues (though most do, in fact, oppose same-sex marriage, per se). Many of Bush's supporters were what I would call "values voters once-removed," voters who, while rejecting some of the actual values in question, nonetheless saw themselves as the *kind of people* who vote for the more socially conservative candidate.

Bush won this election because he managed to speak, often in subtextual ways, to a deep-seated yearning inside many Americans for that time in American history, real or imagined, when families were more traditional, more whole and closer-knit, when children said the Pledge of Allegiance in school without challenge or controversy, and when there was sharper moral clarity in our national life and greater piety in our spiritual life. No force, in recent years, has done more to craft, codify, inculcate, reinforce, and popularize this specific sense of identity, particularly in the states now considered red, than contemporary country music radio. The Bush campaign's great achievement in the 2004 election was to recognize and tap into this country music-fueled vision and convincingly invoke its code and symbolism, doing so in ways that were largely invisible to most analysts but intuitively understood by the target audience.

John Edwards was wrong: there aren't two Americas. There are, however, two very different visions of America. It is these two visions, more than anything else, that give the red and blue states their distinctive tints. And it is country music that gives one of those visions its most compelling voice.

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