“Battleground Oregon: Understanding our urban-rural divide”
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As we enter the final stages of the presidential campaign, it’s hard to recall one more contentious, at least since the Vietnam War. Now that the conventions are over, the Presidential debates will be the next battlefield, with so few undecided, the final push will be all about getting voters to actually weigh in.

Many Kerry supporters appear passionate and vociferous in their dislike of President Bush. A recent “Air America” talk radio caller articulated the left’s anguish: “I just don’t understand how can it be so close?”

A regular reader of The Oregonian’s editorial section might also be hard-pressed to explain the polls, given all the anti-Bush letters, editorials and political cartoons. All this would seem to point to massive support for Kerry, yet somehow the polls have the incumbent president either even or ahead. Its no wonder the “Air America” caller was so befuddled.

So why *do* the polls continue to show the race to be so close? Troubling to the Kerry campaign from the start were indications that many voters continue to support Bush despite low satisfaction ratings, for both the economy and his handling of Iraq.

Another reason for the apparent contradiction was made evident by two polls we conducted this past spring. Both were scientific samples of Oregonians, but one poll focused on frequent voters, while the other was an all-inclusive household poll.

The household poll had Kerry ahead of Bush 38% to 34%, but the likely voter poll showed Bush ahead 44 percent to 39 percent. Our most recent likely voter poll among Oregon voters (conducted at the beginning of the Republican convention) had Bush and Kerry statistically even (46% to 45%). Hence, average Oregonians and “likely voters” are different people.

During Richard Nixon’s presidency, Vice President Spiro Agnew maintained that a “silent majority” of Americans continued to support the president, despite broad public criticism. Such would seem to be the case with President Bush, as well.

Both major parties have pushed hard to expand voter registration. The RNC recently reported that they have achieved 2.4 of their 3 million new voter registrations. The Democrats and their supporters have also spent millions to grow their base.

Yet here in Oregon, the Secretary of State’s website shows only about a 1 percent increase in the number of voters registered between December 2003 and June 2004, and ironically, the largest increase (7 percent) was among unaffiliated voters.

If Democrats are surprised by the closeness of the election, it may be because many live in densely packed urban areas, surrounded by like-minded friends, culture, and media. In the urban environs it seems comfortable to be anti-Bush.

Senator Kerry's challenge multiplies from the city centers outward. Kerry can afford lose the country, but he can't afford to lose the suburbs--or at least not in the states without mega urban centers, such as New York or California. After the debates, the campaigns will turn their attention to getting out the vote, in these areas with major emphasis on the less-frequent voters.

The geographic separation between America's divided electorate has never been more acute, and the fact that this election remains so close has stirred a sense of fervency in American electoral politics not seen in perhaps thirty years. And if -- at the end of this knock-down-drag-out, better-than-Reality-TV, winner-take-all election – our understanding of the stark differences between urban and rural America has been enhanced, then that will have been a good thing.