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COMMENTARY

Secret GOP Weapon: The Scots-Irish Vote

 By **JAMES WEBB**
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To an outsider George W. Bush's political demeanor seems little more than stumbling tautology. He utters his campaign message in clipped phrases, filled with bravado and repeated references to God, and to resoluteness of purpose. But to a trained eye and ear these performances have the deliberate balance of a country singer at the Grand Ole Opry.

Speaking in a quasi-rural dialect that his critics dismiss as affected, W is telling his core voting groups that he is one of them. No matter that he is the product of many generations of wealth; that his grandfather was a New England senator; that his father moved the family's wealth south just like the hated Carpetbaggers after the Civil War; that he himself went North to Andover and Yale and Harvard when it came time for serious grooming. And as with the persona, so also with the key issues. The Bush campaign proceeds outward from a familiar mantra: strong leadership, success in war, neighbor helping neighbor, family values, and belief in God. Contrary to many analyses, these issues reach much farther than the oft-discussed Christian Right. The president will not win re-election without carrying the votes of the Scots-Irish, along with those others who make up the "Jacksonian" political culture that has migrated toward the values of this ethnic group.


At the same time, few key Democrats seem even to know that the Scots-Irish exist, as this culture is so adamantly individualistic that it will never overtly form into one of the many interest groups that dominate Democratic Party politics. Indeed, it can be fairly said that Al Gore lost in 2000 because the Democrats ignored this reality and the Scots-Irish enclaves of West Virginia and Tennessee turned against him.

Why are the 30 million Scots-Irish, who may well be America's strongest cultural force, so invisible to America's intellectual elites? It is commonplace for commentators to lump together those who are descended from British roots into the WASP culture typified by New England Brahmins, or the Irish, who are overwhelmingly Catholic. But it is political nonsense to consider the Scots-Irish as part of either.

The Scots-Irish are derived from a mass migration from Northern Ireland in the 1700s, when the Calvinist "Ulster Scots" decided they'd had enough of fighting Anglican England's battles against Irish Catholics. One group settled initially in New Hampshire, spilling over into modern-day Vermont and Maine. The overwhelming majority -- 95% -- migrated to the Appalachians in a series of frontier communities that stretched from Pennsylvania to northern Alabama and Georgia. They eventually became the dominant culture of the South and much of the Midwest.

True American-style democracy had its origins in this culture. Its values emanated from the Scottish Kirk, which had thrown out the top-down hierarchy of the Catholic Church and replaced it with governing

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councils made up of ordinary citizens. This mix of fundamentalist religion and social populism grew from a people who for 16 centuries had been tested through constant rebellions against centralized authority. The Scots who headed into the feuds of 17th-century Ulster, and then into the backlands of the American frontier, hardened further into a radicalism that proclaimed that no man had a duty to obey a government if its edicts violated his moral conscience.

Matched with this rebelliousness was a network of extended family "clans," still evident among the Scots-Irish, built on an egalitarianism that measured a person by their own code of honor, courage, loyalty and audacious leadership. Noted Scottish professor T.C. Smout said it best when he observed that these relationships were "compounded both of egalitarian and patriarchal features, full of respect for birth while being free from humility." They demanded strong leaders, but would never tolerate one who considered himself above his fellows. Andrew Jackson, the first president of Scots-Irish descent, forever changed the style of American politics, creating a movement that even today is characterized as Jacksonian democracy.

The Scots-Irish comprised a large percentage of Reagan Democrats, and contributed heavily to the "red state" votes that gave Mr. Bush the presidency in 2000. The areas with the highest Scots-Irish populations include New Hampshire, Pennsylvania, Virginia, West Virginia, Kentucky, Tennessee, the Carolinas, Georgia, Alabama, northern Florida, Mississippi, Arkansas, northern Louisiana, Missouri, Texas, Oklahoma, Kansas, Colorado, southern Ohio, Illinois, Indiana, and parts of California, particularly Bakersfield. The "factory belt," especially around Detroit, also has a strong Scots-Irish mix.

The Scots-Irish political culture is populist and inclusive, which has caused other ethnic groups to gravitate toward it. Country music is its cultural emblem. It is family-oriented. Its members are values-based rather than economics-based: they often vote on emotional issues rather than their pocket books. Because of their heritage of "kinship," they're strangely unenvious of wealth, and measure leaders by their personal strength and values rather than economic position. They have a 2,000-year-old military tradition based on genealogy, are the dominant culture of the military and the Christian Right, and define the character of blue-collar America. They are deeply patriotic, having consistently supported every war America has fought, and intensely opposed to gun control -- an issue that probably cost Mr. Gore both his home state of Tennessee and traditionally Democratic West Virginia in 2000.

The GOP strategy is heavily directed toward keeping peace with this culture, which every four years is seduced by the siren song of guns, God, flag, opposition to abortion and success in war. By contrast, over the past generation the Democrats have consistently alienated this group, to their detriment.

The Democrats lost their affinity with the Scots-Irish during the Civil Rights era, when -- because it was the dominant culture in the South -- its "redneck" idiosyncrasies provided an easy target during their shift toward minorities as the foundation of their national electoral strategy. Their long-term problem in having done so is twofold. First, it hampers their efforts to carry almost any Southern state. And second, the Scots-Irish culture has strong impact outside the South. This is especially strong in many battleground states. It is no accident that many political observers call the central region in Pennsylvania "Northern Alabama." Scots-Irish traditions play heavily in New Hampshire -- the only New England state that Mr. Bush carried in 2000. Large numbers of Scots-Irish settled in the southern regions of Ohio (called "Northern Kentucky"), Indiana and Illinois. They were among the principal groups to settle Missouri and Colorado. They migrated heavily to the industrial areas in Michigan, which is one reason that George Wallace, ran so strongly in that state in 1968 and 1972.

But other than with those who identify with the Christian Right, it would be wrong to think that the Republicans have their firm loyalty. For every Lee Atwater or Karl Rove who understands the Scots-Irish, there are others who privately disdain them. And sometimes not so privately -- the most vicious ethnic slur

of the presidential campaign came from Charles Krauthammer, after Howard Dean suggested that the Democrats needed to reach out to the "guys with the Confederate flags on their pickup trucks." Mr. Krauthammer, who has never complained about this ethnic group when it has marched off to fight the wars he wishes upon us, wrote that Mr. Dean "wants the white trash vote . . . that's clearly what he meant," and that he was pandering to "rebel-yelling racist rednecks."

As with other ethnic groups, those inside the culture know how to read such code words, and there may come a time when the right Democratic strategist knows how to counter them in the manner that Mr. Dean contemplated. John Edwards is at his visceral best when his campaign rhetoric seems directed at doing that.

The decline in public education and the outsourcing of jobs has hit this culture hard. Diversity programs designed to assist minorities have had an unequal impact on white ethnic groups and particularly this one, whose roots are in a poverty-stricken South. Their sons and daughters serve in large numbers in a war whose validity is increasingly coming into question. In fact, the greatest realignment in modern politics would take place rather quickly if the right national leader found a way to bring the Scots-Irish and African Americans to the same table, and so to redefine a formula that has consciously set them apart for the past two centuries.

Mr. Webb, a former secretary of the Navy, is the author of "Born Fighting: How the Scots-Irish Shaped America," just published by Broadway.

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