Culture War?

The Myth of a Polarized America

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CHAPTER 1

Culture War?

There is a religious war going on in this country, a cultural war as critical to the kind of nation we shall be as the Cold War itself, for this war is for the soul of America. *

With those ringing words insurgent candidate Pat Buchanan fired up his supporters at the 1992 Republican National Convention. To be sure, not all the assembled delegates cheered Buchanan's call to arms, which was at odds with the "kinder, gentler" image that incumbent President George H. W. Bush had attempted to project. Indeed, Republican professionals expressed concern about the "family values" emphasis of the convention in general, and Buchanan's remarks in particular.[1] Their concerns proved well

* This quotation appears in slightly different forms throughout the literature, probably because it was written up differently by journalists who covered the speech and/or read slightly different versions of it. This version is quoted in Nancy Davis and Robert Robinson, "A War for America's Soul?" In Rhys Williams, ed., *Cultural Wars in American Politics* (New York: Aldine de Gruyter, 1997); 39.

[1] Andrew Rosenthal, "The 1992 Campaign: Issues—'Family Values,'" *New York Times*, September 21, 1992: 1.

founded: elections analysts later included the Convention and Buchanan's fiery words among the factors contributing to the defeat of President Bush, albeit of lesser importance than the struggling economy and repudiation of his "Read my lips, no new taxes" pledge.[2]

In the years since Buchanan's declaration of cultural war the idea of a clash of cultures has become a common theme in discussions of American politics. Most commentators use the culture war metaphor to refer to a displacement or supercession of the classic economic conflicts that animated twentieth-century politics in the advanced democracies by newly emergent moral and religious ones. The literature generally attributes Buchanan's inspiration to a 1991 book, *Culture Wars*, by sociologist James Davison Hunter, who divided Americans into the culturally "orthodox" and the culturally "progressive" and argued that increasing conflict was inevitable.[3] In a later book provocatively titled *Before the Shooting Begins*, Hunter writes

> *. . . when cultural impulses this momentous vie against each other to dominate public life, tension, conflict, and perhaps even violence are inevitable.*[4]

Not surprisingly, no one has embraced the concept of the culture war more enthusiastically than the journalistic community, ever alert for subjects that have "news value." Conflict, of course,

[2] Paul Abramson, John Aldrich, and David Rohde, *Change and Continuity in the 1992 Elections.* (Washington, DC: CQ Press, 1994): 43–44, 137. For a detailed analysis of the association between family values issues and the 1992 voting see Laura Arnold and Herbert Weisberg, "Parenthood, Family Values, and the 1992 Presidential Election." *American Politics Quarterly* 24 (1996): 194–220.
[3] *Culture Wars: The Struggle to Define America* (New York: Basic Books, 1991).
[4] *Before the Shooting Begins: Searching for Democracy in America's Culture War* (New York Free Press. 1995): xx.

is high in news value. Disagreement, division, polarization, battles, and war make good copy. Agreement, consensus, moderation, compromise, and peace do not. Thus, the concept of a culture war fits well with the news sense of journalists who cover American politics. Their reports tell us that contemporary voters are deeply divided on moral issues:

> *. . . the real emotional splits in the country lie in gut-level social issues: They are the topics that move Americans in their everyday lives, and the ones that actually draw the lines separating the two parties today.*[5]

> *The divide went deeper than politics. It reached into the nation's psyche. . . . It was the moral dimension that kept Bush in the race.*[6]

And close elections do not reflect indifferent, uncertain, or ambivalent voters; rather, close elections reflect evenly matched blocs of deeply committed partisans:

> *When George W. Bush took office, half the country cheered and the other half seethed.*[7]

> *Such political divisions cannot easily be shifted by any president, let alone in two years, because they reflect deep demographic divisions. . . . The 50-50 nation appears to be made*

[5] John Harwood and Shailagh Murray, "Split Society: Year After Year, The Big Divide In Politics Is Race," *Wall Street Journal*, December 19, 2002: A1.
[6] David Broder, "One Nation, Divisible; Despite Peace, Prosperity, Voters Agree to Disagree," *Washington Post*, November 8, 2000: A1.
[7] Jill Lawrence, "Behind Its United Front, Nation Divided As Ever," *USA Today*, February 18, 2002: A1.

up of two big, separate voting blocks, with only a small number of swing voters in the middle.[8]

The 2000 election brought us the familiar pictorial representation of the culture war in the form of the red and blue map of the United States reproduced on the inside front cover of this book. Vast areas of the southern and midwestern heartland emerged from the election as Republican red. But the huge expanses of red territory contained relatively few people per square mile. The much smaller areas of Democratic blue contained the more populous cosmopolitan states of the east and west coasts and the Great Lakes. Commentators accompanied such colorful maps with polling factoids intended to illustrate the cultural divide: the probability that a white, gun-toting, born-again, rural southern male voted for Al Gore was about as tiny as the probability that a feminist, agnostic, professional, urban northern female voted for George W. Bush, although few asked how many Americans fell into such narrowly defined categories. For the most part pundits reified the different colors on the map, treating them as *prima facie* evidence of deep cultural divisions:

Bush knew that the landslide he had wished for in 2000 . . . had vanished into the values chasm separating the blue states from the red ones.[9]

The Year of our Lord 2000 was the year of the map. . . . This election was Hollywood vs. Nashville, "Sex and the City" vs. "Touched by an Angel," National Public Radio vs. talk radio,

[8] "On His High Horse," *Economist*, November 9, 2002: 25.
[9] John Kenneth White, *The Values Divide* (New Jersey: Chatham House, 2003): 171.

"Doonesbury" vs. "B.C.", "Hotel California" vs. "Okie From Muskogee." It was The New York Times vs. National Review Online, Dan Rather vs. Rush Limbaugh, Rosie O'Donnell vs. Dr. Laura, Barbra Streisand vs. Dr. James Dobson, the Supreme Court vs.—well, the Supreme Court.[10]

Tens of millions of good people in Middle America voted Republican. But if you look closely at that map you see a more complex picture. You see the state where James Byrd was lynch-dragged behind a pickup truck until his body came apart—it's red. You see the state where Matthew Shepard was crucified on a split-rail fence for the crime of being gay—it's red. You see the state where right-wing extremists blew up a federal office building and murdered scores of federal employees—it's red. The state where an Army private who was thought to be gay was bludgeoned to death with a baseball bat, and the state where neo-Nazi skinheads murdered two African-Americans because of their skin color, and the state where Bob Jones University spews its anti-Catholic bigotry: they're all red too.[11]

Claims of deep national division were standard fare after the 2000 elections, and to our knowledge few commentators have publicly challenged them.[12] On the contrary, the belief in a fractured nation continues to be expressed even by high-level political operatives:

[10] Terry Mattingly, "'The Map' Spoke Volumes About Our Country's Divisions," *Knoxville News-Sentinel*, December 30, 2000: B2.
[11] Clinton advisor Paul Begala, as quoted in Bob Clark, "As You Were Saying . . . It's Time for Gore's Pit Bull to Practice What He Preaches," *Boston Herald*, November 18, 2000: 16.
[12] For a prominent exception see Robert Samuelson, "Polarization Myths," *Washington Post*, December 3, 2003: A29.

We have two massive colliding forces. One is rural, Christian, religiously conservative. [The other] is socially tolerant, pro-choice, secular, living in New England and the Pacific coast.[13]

You've got 80% to 90% of the country that look at each other like they are on separate planets.[14]

A November 2003 report of the Pew Research Center for the People & the Press led a prominent journalist to comment:

The red states get redder, the blue states get bluer, and the political map of the United States takes on the coloration of the Civil War.[15]

While Andrew Kohut, director of the Pew Center, reportedly commented that

. . . the anger level is so high that if the demonstrators of 1968 had felt like this there would have been gunfire in the streets.[16]

And political commentators see a continuation, if not an intensification of the culture war as the 2004 election approaches.

The culture war between the Red and Blue Nations has erupted again—big time—and will last until Election Day next year. Front lines are all over, from the Senate to the Pentagon

13 Republican pollster Bill McInturff, as quoted in "One Nation, Fairly Divisible, Under God," *Economist*, January 20, 2001: 22.
14 Matthew Dowd, Bush reelection strategist. Dowd was explaining why Bush has not tried to expand his electoral base. Quoted in Ron Brownstein, "Bush Falls to Pre-9/11 Approval Rating," *Los Angeles Times*, October 3, 2003: A1.
15 E. J. Dionne Jr., "One Nation Deeply Divided," *Washington Post*, November 7, 2003: A31.
16 Quoted in John Leo, "Splitting Society, Not Hairs," *US News and World Report Science & Society*, December 15, 2003: 66. Kohut may be too young to remember, but there *was* sporadic gunfire in the streets and on college campuses during the 1960s "time of troubles." We have more to say about the Pew Report in Chapter 3.

to Florida to the Virginia suburbs where, at the Bush-Cheney '04 headquarters, they are blunt about the shape of the battle: "The country's split 50-50 again," a top aide told me, "just as it was in 2000." Translation: They can't win re-election by wooing the (mostly coastal) Blue states, but only by firing up (mostly noncoastal) Reds.[17]

The election will be a verdict on the determined yet controversial way in which Mr. Bush has steered his country. It also comes at a time when America is more bitterly divided than it has been for a generation.[18]

In sum, contemporary observers of American politics apparently have reached a new consensus around the proposition that old disagreements about economics now pale in comparison to new divisions based on sexuality, morality, and religion, divisions so deep as to justify fears of violence and talk of war in describing them.[19]

This short book advances a contrary thesis: the sentiments expressed in the previously quoted pronouncements of scholars, journalists, and politicos range from simple exaggeration to sheer nonsense. Such assertions both reflect and contribute to a widespread mythology about contemporary American politics. The simple truth is that there is no culture war in the United States—no battle for the soul of America rages, at least none that most

17 Howard Fineman, "Election Boils Down to a Culture War: Abortion Issue is First Skirmish in the Battle for White House." *Newsweek*. October 22, 2003. http://msnbc.msn.com/id/3225677, accessed December 12, 2003.
18 "America's Angry Election," *Economist*, January 3, 2004: 7.
19 Of course, there is nothing new about cultural conflict in the United States—it has been a common element of our politics since the beginning of the Republic. It only seems new to today's generation of political commentators because such issues were relatively muted during the 1930s to the 1960s.

Americans are aware of. Certainly, one can find a few warriors who engage in noisy skirmishes. Many of the activists in the political parties and the various cause groups do, in fact, hate each other and regard themselves as combatants in a war. But their hatreds and battles are not shared by the great mass of the American people—certainly nowhere near to "80–90 percent of the country"—who are for the most part moderate in their views and tolerant in their manner.[20] The bulk of the American citizenry is somewhat in the position of the unfortunate citizens of some third-world countries who try to stay out of the crossfire while Maoist guerrillas and right-wing death squads shoot at each other.

The myth of a culture war rests on misinterpretation of election returns, lack of hard examination of polling data, systematic and self-serving misrepresentation by issue activists, and selective coverage by an uncritical media more concerned with news value than with getting the story right. There is little evidence that Americans' ideological or policy *positions* are more polarized today than they were two or three decades ago, although their *choices* often seem to be. The explanation is that the political figures Americans evaluate are more polarized. A polarized political class makes the citzenry appear polarized, but it is only that—an appearance.

In Chapter 2 we show that the red state versus blue state contrast grossly exaggerates the actual differences among their residents. Chapter 3 shows that the United States is not polarized along other traditional cleavage lines either. What has happened is

20 Thus, our conclusions support the earlier findings of Alan Wolfe, *One Nation, After All* (New York: Viking, 1998). In some circles Wolfe's findings have been discounted as reflecting only the views of 200 middle class suburban families. The chapters that follow report similar findings based on an examination of the views of tens of thousands of Americans questioned in national surveys.

that partisans have become better sorted into the parties than in past decades. Thus, at the highest levels the parties are more polarized, but most commentators fail to realize that this *partisan* polarization has only a faint reflection in *popular* polarization, so the latter certainly is not a cause of the former. Chapter 4 shows that the picture of a largely centrist population holds even when we focus on abortion. Chapter 5 addresses a rapidly changing subject—attitudes toward homosexual rights—that exploded on the national scene in the form of the gay marriage issue in the spring of 2004. While there is considerable division in the population about gay rights and gay marriage, the movement toward increased acceptance of gays and lesbians in the past decade has been so strong that we believe the present divisions are largely a transitional state. Chapter 6 shows that the purported replacement of economic cleavages in the electorate by religious ones is a premature conclusion. Chapter 7 shows how the polarization of partisan elites can give the *appearance* that voters are shifting emphasis from economics to religion and morality, even while voter preferences change not a whit. Finally, Chapter 8 discusses how extreme voices have come to dominate American political discourse, and how their influence might be lessened and the vast middle ground empowered.

CHAPTER 2

A 50:50 Nation? The Red and the Blue States

In one of the claims quoted in the preceding chapter a writer for the *Economist* refers to "the 50:50 nation." During the late 1990s and early 2000s this phrase began to appear in popular discussions of American politics, as did a similar phrase, "the 49 percent nation."[1] Such phraseology referred to the closely divided national elections of the late 1990s, when the winning party's popular vote share repeatedly came in right around 49 percent of the total vote:

• 1996 Clinton Vote	49.2%
• 1996 Republican House Vote	48.9
• 1998 Republican House Vote	48.9
• 2000 Gore Vote	48.4

[1] Michael Barone, "The 49% Nation," in Michael Barone, Richard Cohen, and Charles E. Cook Jr., eds., *The Almanac of American Politics* (Washington, DC: National Journal, 2002): 21–45.

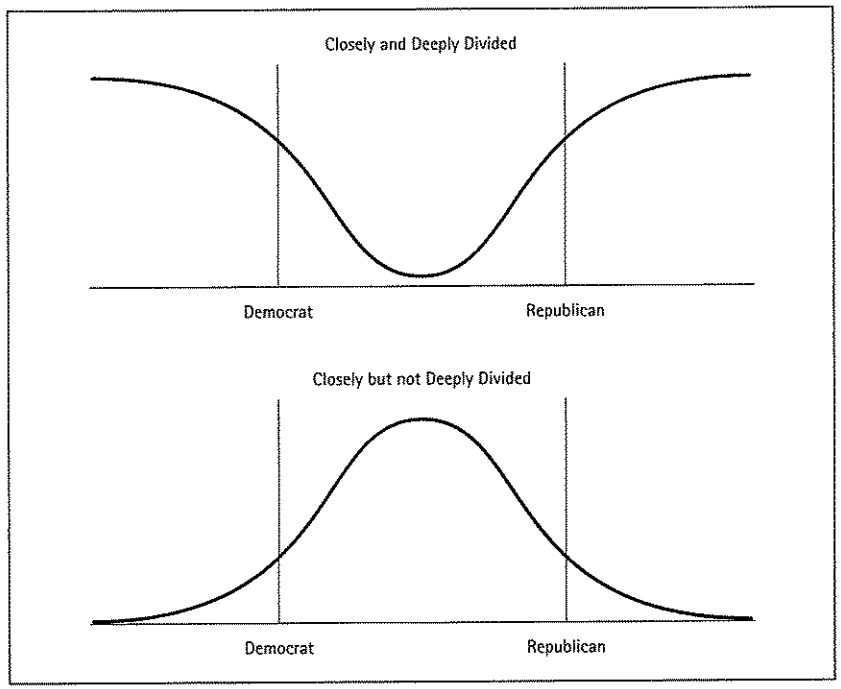
- 2000 Republican House Vote 48.3
- 2002 Republican House Vote 50.9

If we consider only the two-party vote, the parties are almost exactly evenly matched nationally—50:50—or at least they were until the 2002 House elections, when the Republicans broke through that ceiling and got to 52.9 percent. Clearly, recent national elections have been exceedingly close. No presidential candidate has won a majority of the popular vote since 1988, the past three elections constituting the longest such streak since the so-called "era of indecision," when no presidential candidate won a majority of the popular vote in the four elections from 1880 to 1892.

The question is what to make of these recent close elections? For most commentators, the answer is obvious: the American electorate is polarized. In the previously quoted words of the *Economist,* the close recent U.S. elections "*. . . reflect deep demographic divisions. . . . The 50-50 nation appears to be made up of two big, separate voting blocks, with only a small number of swing voters in the middle.*" The top panel of Figure 2.1 depicts this claim graphically. The electorate is highly polarized: a large number of "progressives" on the left support the Democrats, a large number of "orthodox" on the right support the Republicans, and very few people occupy the middle ground. With a polarized electorate like this, elections will be very close, half the voters will cheer, and half the voters will seethe, as *USA Today* asserts.

But the U-shaped distribution in the top panel of the figure is not the only electoral configuration that will produce close elections. Most obviously, consider the bell-shaped distribution in the

FIGURE 2.1
Two Very Different Close Election Scenarios



bottom panel of Figure 2.1, which is the inverse of the U-shaped distribution in the top. In the lower figure most people hold moderate or centrist positions and relatively few are extreme partisans. But if the Democratic and Republican parties position themselves equidistant from the center on opposite sides, then the bottom configuration too produces close elections. In both examples the electorate is *closely* divided, but only in the top panel of the figure would we say that the voters are *deeply* divided. In the top panel it would be accurate to say that voters are polarized, but in the

bottom panel we would more accurately call most voters ambivalent or indifferent.

When an election results in a near 50:50 outcome, the standard interpretation seems to be that the electorate is polarized as in the top panel of Figure 2.1. Why should that be the default interpretation? When an individual voter reports that he or she is on the fence (50:50) about whom to vote for, everyone understands that there are a number of plausible interpretations: the individual likes both candidates equally, dislikes both candidates equally, or really doesn't give a damn. No one suggests that the individual is polarized. But the aggregate and individual situations are analogous. In each case a continuous variable (percent of the vote/probability of voting for a given candidate) is compressed into a dichotomous variable (Republican or Democratic victory/Republican or Democratic vote), with enormous loss of information. To illustrate, consider the map on the inside back cover of this book, which differs from the red and blue map on the front cover in that a state is colored red or blue only if it was won by a margin of 55:45 or greater, a standard political science definition of marginality. Now a great deal of the map is gray, reflecting the fact that many states are marginal and not securely in the camp of one party or the other. In language analogous to that used to describe individual voters, we might call such states "ambivalent" or "uncertain."

In sum, close elections may reflect equal numbers of voters who hate one candidate and love the other, voters who like both, voters who do not care much at all about either candidate, or various combinations of these conditions. Without taking a detailed look at voter attitudes, we cannot determine whether close elections reflect a polarized electorate that is deeply divided, or an

ambivalent electorate that is closely divided between the choices it is offered. So, let us take a closer look at the public opinion that underlies the knife-edge elections of the past few years. Is it as divided as election outcomes seem to suggest?

IS THE COUNTRY POLARIZED?

> *You've got 80% to 90% of the country that look at each other like they are on separate planets." (Bush reelection strategist, Matthew Dowd).*[2]

Is America polarized? Strictly speaking the question should be "has America become *more* polarized?" for that is the claim. But if the country is not polarized to begin with, the question of whether it has become more polarized is moot. Barely two months before the supposed "values chasm separating the blue states from the red ones" emerged in the 2000 election, the Pew Research Center for the People & the Press conducted an extensive national survey that included a wide sampling of issues, a number of those which figure prominently in discussions of the culture war.[3] We have divided the Pew survey respondents into those who resided in states that two months later were to be categorized as blue states and states that two months later were to be categorized as red states. The question is whether there is any indication in these data that the election results would leave one half the country "seething" and one half "cheering," as *USA Today* reports.

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[2] Quoted in Ron Brownstein, "Bush Falls to Pre-9/11 Approval Rating," *Los Angeles Times*, October 3, 2003: A1.

[3] The Pew survey was conducted August 24–September 10, 2000. Pew's summaries of the findings (along with links to the data and questionnaires) are contained in two separate reports: "Issues and Continuity Now Working for Gore" http://people-press.org/reports/display.php3?ReportID=33 and "Religion and Politics: The Ambivalent Majority" http://people-press.org/reports/display.php3?ReportID=32.

TABLE 2.1
Red Versus Blue States: Political Inclinations

	BLUE	RED
Vote intention: Bush	34%	44%
Democratic self-ID	36	32
Republican self-ID	25	31
Liberal self-ID	22	18
Conservative self-ID	33	41

Table 2.1 indicates that the residents of blue and red states certainly intended to vote differently: the percentage expressing an intention to vote for George Bush was ten points higher in the red states. Reminiscent of our discussion of dichotomous choices, however, the partisan and ideological predispositions underlying these voting differences were less distinct.[4] The difference between the proportions of red and blue state respondents who consider themselves Democrats is not statistically significant, and the difference in the proportions who consider themselves Republicans is barely so—in both red and blue states self-identified independents are the largest group. Similarly, about a fifth of the respondents in both red and blue states consider themselves liberals (the four point difference is not statistically significant), and while there are more conservatives in the red states, there are more conservatives than liberals even in the blue states. In both the red and blue states the largest group of people classified themselves as moderates. In sum, while the aggregate voting patterns of red and blue states

[4] More generally, William Mayer shows that in the presidential elections between 1980 and 2000, inclusive, votes are far more polarized than candidate evaluations. See William Mayer, "The Swing Voter in American Presidential Elections: A Preliminary Inquiry," Northeastern University, ms.: Table 2.

TABLE 2.2
Red Versus Blue States: Group Evaluations
(Percent very/mostly favorable toward . . .)

	BLUE	RED
Republican Party	50%	58%
Democratic Party	64	55
Evangelical Christians	60	63
Jews	79	77
Catholics	77	79
Muslims	56	47
Atheists	37	27

would turn out to be quite distinct in November, the underlying patterns of political identification were much less so.

Table 2.2 reports similar results for the group evaluations reported by residents of red and blue states. Unsurprisingly, red state residents regard the Republican Party more favorably than the Democrats, but 55 percent of them regard the Democratic Party favorably. Conversely, blue state residents regard the Democratic Party more favorably than the Republicans, but 50 percent report favorable evaluations of the Republican Party. Evangelical Christians are evaluated equally positively by solid majorities in both red and blue states, as are Jews and Catholics. Muslims fare less well overall and red state residents regard them lower still, but one wonders how much experience many people have with actual Muslims—especially in many of the red states—as opposed to the abstract concept of a Muslim. Finally, in a standard finding, neither red nor blue state residents like atheists: Americans do not

TABLE 2.3
Red Versus Blue States: Beliefs and Perceptions:
(Percent strongly supporting statement)

	BLUE	RED
Gov't almost always wasteful and inefficient	39%	44%
Discrimination main reason blacks cannot get ahead	25	21
Immigrants strengthen our country	44	32
Fight for country right or wrong	35	43
Too much power concentrated in large companies	64	62
Corporations make too much profit	44	43
Al Gore is more liberal than he lets on	55	59
George Bush is more conservative than he lets on	59	57
Wish Clinton could run again (strongly disagree)	51	61

care very much what or how people believe, but they are generally negative toward people who don't believe in anything.

Across a range of other matters, blue and red state residents differ little, if at all. Figures in Table 2.3 indicate that similar proportions regard the government as *almost always* wasteful and inefficient—relative to the red states, the blue states clearly are not wellsprings of support for big government. Only small minorities in either category regard discrimination as the main reason that African Americans can't get ahead—the blue states are not hotbeds of racial liberalism. Immigrants receive a warmer reception among blue state residents, but multiculturalism remains a minority position even in the blue states. Blue state residents are less likely to endorse unqualified patriotism.

On the other hand, red state residents are just as likely as blue state residents to believe that large companies have too much

power and to think that corporations make too much profit—the red states are not the running dogs of corporate America. Amusingly, majorities in both red and blue states agree that Al Gore is more of a liberal than he lets on, and that George Bush is more of a conservative than he lets on—they were not fooled by all the talk about "progressives" and "compassionate conservatives." And finally—and counter to suggestions of numerous Democrats after the election—majorities in both red and blue states *strongly* disagree with the proposition that they wish Bill Clinton could run again. Clinton was more favorably regarded in the blue states, but Clinton fatigue by no means was limited to the red states.

When it comes to issue sentiments, Table 2.4 shows that in many cases the small differences we have seen so far become even smaller. Contrary to Republican dogma, red state citizens are equally as unenthusiastic about using the surplus (har!) to cut taxes as blue state citizens. Nearly equal numbers of blue and red state residents think the surplus should be used to pay off the national debt, increase domestic spending, and bolster Social Security and Medicare. Contrary to Democratic dogma, blue state citizens are equally as enthusiastic as red state citizens about abolishing the inheritance tax, giving government grants to religious organizations, adopting school vouchers, and partially privatizing Social Security. Overwhelming majorities in both red and blue states favor providing prescription drugs through Medicare, and solid majorities endorse protecting the environment, whatever it takes. Neither red nor blue state residents attach high priority to increasing defense spending. Looking at this series of issue items, one wonders why anyone would bother separating respondents into red and blue categories—the differences are insignificant.

TABLE 2.4
Red Versus Blue States: Issue Sentiments

	BLUE	RED
Should use the surplus to cut taxes	14%	14%
. . . pay off the national debt	21	23
. . . increase domestic spending	28	24
. . . bolster SS and Medicare	35	38
Favor abolition of inheritance tax	70	72
. . . gov't grants to religious organizations	67	66
. . . school vouchers for low and middle income parents	54	50
. . . partial privatization of SS	69	71
. . . Medicare coverage of prescription drugs	91	92
. . . increasing defense spending	30	37
Do whatever it takes to protect the environment	70	64

But, we have not considered the specific issues that define the culture war. Table 2.5 brings us to the heart of the matter—questions of religion, morality, and sexuality.[5] The proportion of Protestants is significantly higher in the red states, of course, as is the proportion of respondents who report having a "born again" experience. There is a real difference here between the heartland and the coasts. But the significance of this difference fades when we dig deeper. Only a minority of red state respondents reports being very involved in church activities—only marginally more than those blue state respondents who report heavy involvement. A higher proportion of red state respondents report that religion is

[5] Unfortunately, there was no question about abortion views in the Pew Survey, only an item on "which party would better represent your views?" Such items are contaminated by projection and rationalization. We deal with the question of abortion at length in Chapter 4.

TABLE 2.5
Red Versus Blue States: Religion and Morals

	BLUE	RED
Protestant	50%	69%
"Born again" or Evangelical Christian	28	45
Very involved in church activities	21	29
Religion is very important in my life	62	74
Churches should keep out of politics	46	43
Ever right for clergy to discuss candidates or issues from the pulpit? (yes)	35	33
Ban dangerous books from school libraries (yes)	37	42
Homosexuality should be accepted by society		
Agree strongly	41	31
Agree not strongly	16	14

very important in their lives, but a healthy 62 percent majority of blue state respondents feel similarly. Very similar proportions think churches should stay out of politics, and the minority of red state residents who approve of the clergy talking politics from the pulpit is slightly smaller than the minority in the blue states. Book-burners are only slightly more common in the red states. Finally, there is a clear difference in one of the major issues of the culture war, homosexuality, but probably less of a difference than many would have expected. The level of support for societal acceptance of homosexuality is ten percentage points higher in the blue states (twelve points if we add those who waffle to those who fully accept homosexuality). The difference is statistically significant, but it hardly conjures up an image of two coalitions of deeply opposed states engaged in a culture war. Opinion is almost as divided within

the red and the blue states as it is between them. Significantly, this ten- to twelve-point difference on the issue of homosexual acceptance is about as large a difference as we found between red and blue state respondents in the survey. Readers can judge for themselves whether differences of this magnitude justify the military metaphors usually used to describe them.

A legitimate objection to the preceding comparisons is that they include all citizens rather than just voters. Only about half of the age-eligible electorate goes to the polls in contemporary presidential elections, and far fewer vote in lower-level elections. It is well known that partisanship and ideology are strong correlates of who votes: more intense partisans and more extreme ideologues are more likely to vote.[6] Thus, it is possible that the *voters* in red states differ more from the *voters* in blue states than the residents do. To consider this possibility we turn to the 2000 National Election Study which—after the election—asks individuals whether and how they voted. In 2000, the NES reported a vote distribution reasonably close to the actual national division: 50.6 percent of the respondents reported voting for Gore, 45.5 percent for Bush, and the remainder for minor candidates.[7]

Tables 2.6 and 2.7 report differences among reported voters in the NES that are only marginally larger than those reported among all respondents in the Pew Survey. Again, the largest difference is for the vote itself. To reiterate, even if an individual feels 55:45 between the two candidates, she has to vote one way or the

[6] For time series data see Figures 2a–2b and 3a–3b in Morris Fiorina, "Whatever Happened to the Median Voter?" available at http://www.stanford.edu/~mfiorina/.
[7] http://www.umich.edu/~nes/. The National Election Studies is a research and data-distribution organization located at the University of Michigan and supported by the National Science Foundation. Surveys have been conducted in every national election year since 1952.

TABLE 2.6
Red Versus Blue States: Political Inclinations

	BLUE	RED
Bush vote	37%	54%
Democratic self-ID*	40	32
Republican self-ID	25	34
Liberal self-ID	20	11
Conservative self-ID	24	31
Clinton job approval**	71	57
Clinton foreign policy job approval	70	63
Clinton economic job approval	81	74
Democrats better able to handle economy	35	27
Republicans better able to handle economy	24	29
Prefer unified control	24	24

* Party identifiers include strong and weak identifiers, not independent leaners. Liberal identifiers are scale positions 1–2, conservative identifiers 6–7.
**Unless otherwise noted approval figures in the table combine "strongly approve" and "approve."

other. The reported vote for Bush is 54 percent in the red states versus 37 percent in the blue states—a seventeen-point gap, which is larger than the ten-point gap in vote *intention* in the earlier Pew Survey. Self-identified Democrats were significantly more common among blue state voters and self-identified Republicans significantly more common among red state voters, but in neither case does the difference reach double digits; independents and minor party affiliates were a third of the actual electorate in both categories. Self-identified liberals are more common in the blue states, but self-identified conservatives were at least as numerous as liberals in blue states. Again, moderates or centrists were the majority

in both categories. An overwhelming majority of blue state voters approved of Bill Clinton's general job performance as well as his foreign policy job performance and his economic job performance, but so did a heavy, if smaller, majority of red state voters. Only minorities of both blue state and red state voters thought that one party could better handle the economy. Finally, rather than blue state residents favoring Democratic control of the Presidency and Congress and red state residents favoring Republican control, nearly identical majorities of both prefer divided control.

Table 2.7 indicates that issue preferences in the two categories of states are surprisingly similar in many instances. Four in ten voters in both red and blue states agree that immigration should decrease, and seven in ten believe that English should be the official language of the United States (the proportion is actually slightly higher in the blue states). Four in ten voters in both categories put environmental considerations above employment considerations, a surprising similarity in light of the image of red states as hotbeds of clear-cutters and blue states as strongholds of tree-huggers. Narrow majorities of voters in both categories support school vouchers, and large majorities support the death penalty. In neither blue nor red states are people wildly in favor of government intervention to ensure fair treatment of African Americans in employment, and virtually identical (small) proportions support racial preferences in hiring.

Again, when we turn to the specific issues that define the culture war, larger differences emerge, but there also are numerous surprises. A solid majority of blue state voters support stricter gun control laws, but so does a narrow majority of red state voters. Support for women's equality is overwhelming and identical among

TABLE 2.7
Red Versus Blue States: Issue Preferences

	BLUE	RED
Immigration should decrease*	41%	43%
Make English official language	70	66
Environment over jobs	43	42
Favor school vouchers	51	54
Favor death penalty	70	77
Government should ensure fair treatment of blacks in employment	57	51
Blacks should get preferences in hiring	13	14
Stricter gun control	64	52
Equal women's role**	83	82
Attend church regularly	50	65
Moral climate: much worse	26	30
somewhat worse	25	25
Tolerate others' moral views	62	62
Abortion—always legal	48	37
Allow homosexual adoption	52	40
No gay job discrimination	73	62
Favor gays in military (strongly)	60	44

* Unless otherwise noted, the figures in the table combine "strongly" or "completely agree" responses with "mostly" or "somewhat agree" responses
**Scale positions 1–2

voters in both categories of states. Although regular church attenders are significantly more common in the red states, similar proportions in both red and blue states believe the moral climate of the country has deteriorated since 1992, and identical proportions believe that others' moral views should be tolerated. Support for unrestricted abortion is eleven points higher among blue state

voters, but such unqualified support falls short of a majority, and more than a third of red state voters offer similarly unqualified support. The 2000 NES is particularly rich in items tapping people's views about matters related to sexual orientation. Here we find differences between blue and red state voters that are statistically significant, though smaller in magnitude than regular consumers of the news might have expected. A narrow majority of blue state voters would allow homosexuals to adopt children, but so would four in ten red state voters. Solid majorities of voters in both categories support laws that would ban employment discrimination against gays. Sixty percent of blue state voters fully support gays in the military, contrasted with 44 percent of red state voters. This 16 percent difference is the single largest disparity we found between the issue preferences of red and blue state voters. Perhaps Bill Clinton picked the one issue in the realm of sexual orientation that was most likely to create controversy. But the evidence supports the alternative hypothesis that Clinton's executive order polarized the electorate: according to Gallup data, popular support for gays in the military rose through the 1980s and had reached 60 percent in 1989 before plummeting in the wake of Clinton's executive order.[8]

All in all, the comparison of blue and red state residents who claim to have voted in 2000 seems consistent with the picture reflecting comparisons of all residents of blue and red states. There are numerous similarities between red and blue state voters, some differences, and a few notable differences, but little that calls to mind the portrait of a culture war between the states.

[8] Alan Young, "Poll Trends—Attitudes Toward Homosexuality," *Public Opinion Quarterly* 61 (1997): 502.

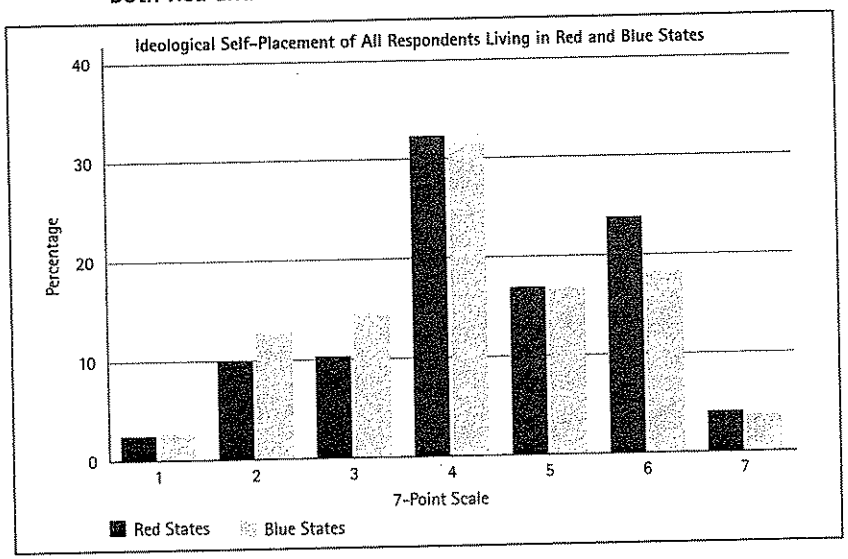
RED STATES VERSUS BLUE STATES: A SUMMARY

Since 1972 the National Election Studies have included an item that asks respondents to place themselves on a seven-category liberal-conservative scale that runs from "extremely liberal" on the left to "extremely conservative" on the right. If the "two nations" metaphor accurately describes the electorate, red state residents should overwhelmingly position themselves on the right of the scale, and blue state residents on the left. Figure 2.2 compares the ideological distributions of red and blue state residents (top panel) and voters (bottom panel).[9] As seen, the distributions of self-placements in the red and blue states are very similar—both are centered over the "moderate" or "middle-of-the road" position, whether we consider all residents or just voters.[10] Moreover, as Figure 2.3 shows, the respondents in red and blue states are in almost complete agreement about the positions of the two parties: large pluralities place the Democratic Party at scale position 2 ("liberal"), and majorities place the Republican Party at scale position 6 ("conservative"). When combined with the data presented earlier in this chapter we think the evidence is compelling that the bottom panel of Figure 2.1 (p. 13) better describes the current state of American politics than the top panel. Elections are close, but voters are not deeply or bitterly divided. In both red

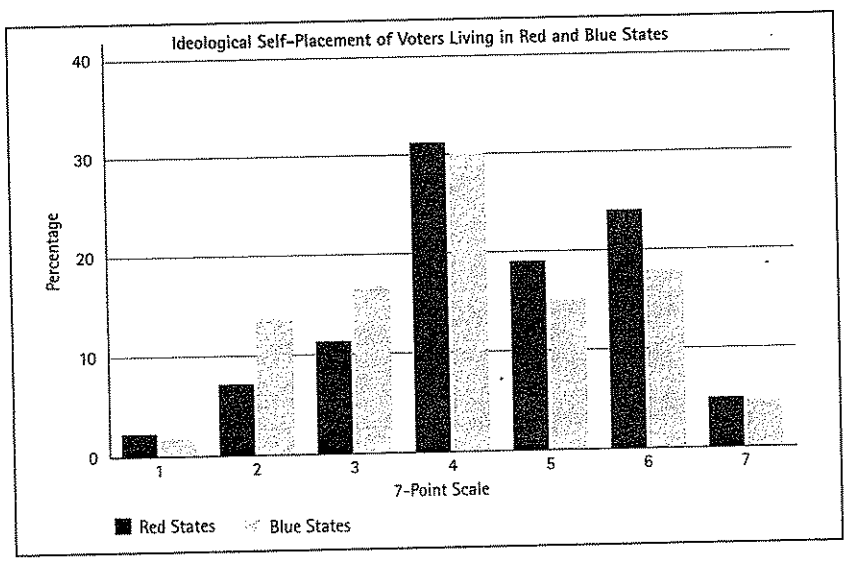
[9] Figures 2.2 and 2.3 are based on the half of the 2000 sample that received the traditional seven-point scale. Because of a question wording experiment the other half of the sample received a branching format question.

[10] We omit those respondents who reply that they do not think of themselves in these terms or do not know what they are—generally about 30 percent of the sample. Political scientists often add this group to those in the middle scale position, which, of course, would make the case for a centrist electorate even stronger.

FIGURE 2.2
Both Red and Blue State Residents Are Basically Centrists

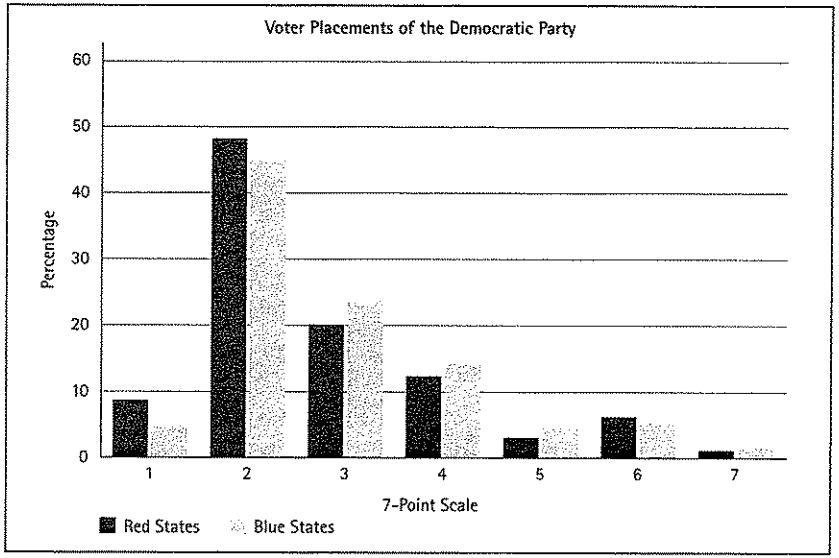


Source: Calculated from the 2000 National Election Studies.

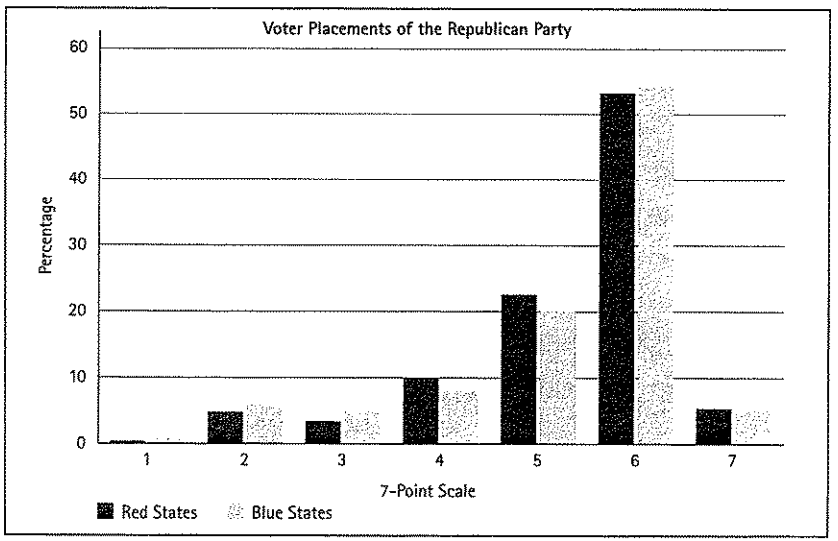


Source: Calculated from the 2000 National Election Studies.

FIGURE 2.3
Red and Blue State Residents Agree That the Parties Are Not Centrist



Source: Calculated from the 2000 National Election Studies.



Source: Calculated from the 2000 National Election Studies.

and blue states a solid majority of voters see themselves as positioned between two relatively extreme parties.

THE OBVIOUS HYPOTHESIS

Given the surprisingly small differences between red and blue states that are apparent in survey data, what underlies all the discussion about the clash of cultures? The most plausible explanation is that culture wars, two nations, and similar exaggerations make an excellent story line for the media, so differences are systematically exaggerated to support the story line. Consider an extensive follow-up report on the 2000 elections published in *USA Today*.[11] Rather than conduct a comprehensive examination of representative survey data, *USA Today* chose two towns—Montclair, New Jersey, and Franklin, Tennessee—to exemplify the cultural differences assumed to exist between the red and blue states. The three-day report discussed public opinion in the towns and reported in detail on the residents and their views. The resulting profile painted a vivid portrait of an America deeply divided by both values and lifestyle.

Montclair, where Gore got three-quarters of the vote, is described as a bustling suburb. With jazz clubs, art museums, and coffee bars it is "teeming with energy and interaction." According to the profile, the local interest groups and associations are prominently left of center: "Montclair has its own gun control, abortion rights, and antiwar groups, its own chapters of Amnesty International and the NAACP." The Council for Secular Humanism recently opened up a "faith-free" Center for Inquiry.

[11] http://pqasb.pqarchiver.com/USAToday/results.html?num=25&st=basic&QryTxt=One+Nation—Divided&sortby=REVERSE_CHRON&datetype=7&x=21&y=10.

In contrast, Franklin, Tennessee, where Bush won by almost thirty points, has brick buildings on Main Street and "shops with such names as Pigg & Peach and Heart and Hands." A Confederate war memorial stands on the town square. The Christian music industry is prominent, with gospel music associations looking for space in the town. Franklin's interest groups and associations are right-leaning: "It's home to the Middle Tennessee Home Education Association for home-schoolers and Christian World Broadcasting, which produces Christian programming in Russian and Chinese and beams it to those countries from a tower in Alaska." The local colleges are mostly Christian.[12]

USA Today went to some length to highlight differences between the two towns. When it came to gun control, for example, *USA Today* interviewed a gun control activist in Montclair, the father of a young man left permanently crippled by a Palestinian terrorist shooter on the Empire State Building observation deck. His views were contrasted with the views of the owner of the Franklin Gun Shop. In all likelihood readers remember vivid contrasts like these—however extreme and unrepresentative—much longer than marginal differences in nationally representative polls, such as those presented earlier in this chapter.

In sum, rather than draw the conclusion that the country is deeply divided from a systematic look at a broad array of data, *USA Today* reversed the process, selecting data to fit its preexisting conclusion that the country was deeply divided. *USA Today* is a reputable national newspaper, more balanced in its political coverage than other national newspapers (one of us even is a long-term subscriber—its graphics are valuable teaching aids). Thus, it

[12] Jill Lawrence, "One Nation, Divided" *USA Today*, February 18, 2002: 10A.

pains us to give *USA Today* an "F" on this report, although we hasten to add that it is not atypical of what one finds in the media.[13] Repeatedly subjected to "analyses" like this one, people can hardly be blamed for believing in a culture war between the states—at least those who play attention to politics.[14] We have read a great deal of popular commentary on the red and blue states and in our view the journalistic analysis that best reflects the statistical portrait we have painted is contained in David Brooks's sensitive contrast of life in Montgomery County, Maryland, with life in Franklin County, Pennsylvania. Our conclusion mirrors his: *"Although there are some real differences between Red and Blue America, there is no fundamental conflict. There may be cracks, but there is no chasm."*[15]

[13] As this book was going to press, the *Washington Post* published a series of articles on the red and the blue states which made *USA Today's* analysis look comprehensive by comparison. See David Von Drehle, "Political Split is Pervasive," *Washington Post*, April 25, 2004: A1. David Finkel, "For a Conservative, Life is Sweet in Sugar Land, Tex.," *Washington Post*, April 26, 2004: A1. David Finkel, "A Liberal Life in the City by the Bay," *Washington Post*, April 27, 2004: A1.

[14] We doubt that the notion of a culture war extends any deeper than the journalistic community and the political class in this country. On numerous occasions when we have tried to describe the research question addressed in this book to neighbors, relatives, and friends, the reaction has been incomprehension. The idea of a culture war is something completely unfamiliar to most Americans.

[15] "One Nation, Slightly Divisible," *The Atlantic*, December 2001: 65.

CHAPTER 3

A 50:50 Nation? Beyond the Red and the Blue States

Despite the attention the red state/blue state categorization has received in the media, few professional analysts would be surprised by the lack of major differences in the preceding chapter's contrasts of public opinion in the red and blue states. A state is a large aggregation, a gross unit of comparison. California is a blue state, but as the map (on page 34) of county election returns shows, most of the state's counties are red. Similarly, Texas is a red state, but there is considerable blue in its large cities and along its border with Mexico. For this reason, we doubt that many professional analysts have taken the red states/blue states distinction very seriously. Thus, one can accept the argument that the division of the country into red and blue is a gross exaggeration but still believe that the country is polarized, increasingly so. We simply need to examine other, more precisely defined categories or dimensions in order to find the expected polarization.