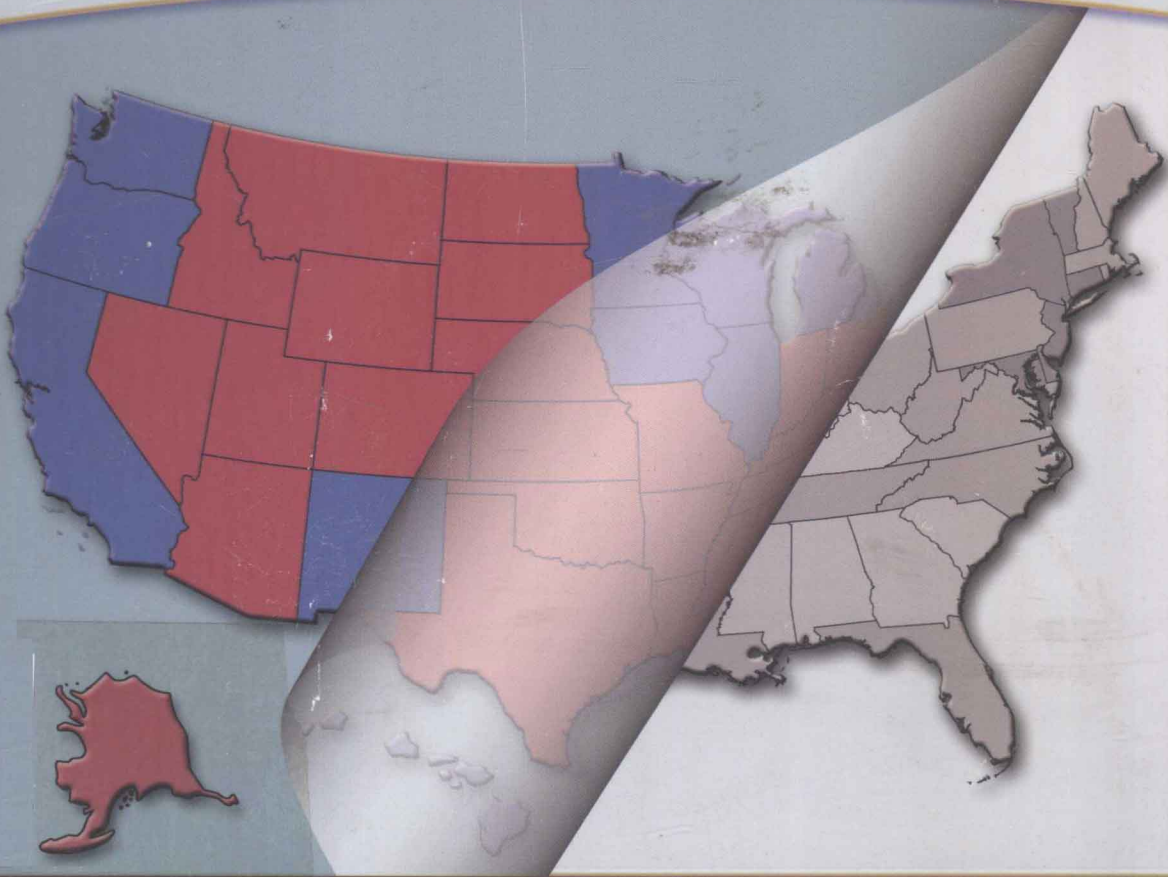


GREAT QUESTIONS IN POLITICS SERIES

Culture War?

The Myth of a Polarized America



MORRIS P. FIORINA

with SAMUEL J. ABRAMS and JEREMY C. POPE

GREAt

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MORRIS P. FIORINA

STANFORD UNIVERSITY

WITH

SAMUEL J. ABRAMS

HARVARD UNIVERSITY

AND

JEREMY C. POPE

STANFORD UNIVERSITY



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Printer and Binder:	Phoenix Color Corporation
Cover Printer:	Phoenix Color Corporation

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Fiorina, Morris P.

Culture war? the myth of a polarized America / Morris P. Fiorina, Samuel J. Abrams,
[and] Jeremy C. Pope. -- 1st ed.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 0-321-27640-X

1. Culture Conflict--United States. 2. Politics and culture--United States. 3. United
States--Politics and government--2001- I. Abrams, Samuel J., 1980- II. Pope, Jeremy C.
1973- III. Title.

HN59.2.F566 2004

306.2'0973--dc22

2004009297

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Please visit our website at <http://www.ablongman.com>.

ISBN 0-321-27640-X

4 5 6 7 8 9 10—PBT—07 06 05

Preface

The late Senator Daniel Patrick Moynihan used to say that we all were entitled to our own opinions, but not to our own facts. This book uses simple facts to confront a distorted political debate in this country. Increasingly, we hear politicians, interest group leaders, and assorted “activists” speak half-truths to the American people. They tell us that the United States is split right down the middle, bitterly and deeply divided about national issues, when the truth is more nearly the opposite. Americans are closely divided, but we are not deeply divided, and we are closely divided because many of us are ambivalent and uncertain, and consequently reluctant to make firm commitments to parties, politicians, or policies. We divide evenly in elections or sit them out entirely because we instinctively seek the center while the parties and candidates hang out on the extremes.

How can the prevailing view assert the direct opposite? Mainly for want of contradiction by those who know better. We should not expect political actors to speak truthfully to us. For them, words are weapons, and the standard of success is electoral and legislative victory, not education or enlightenment. We may regret that perspective, but it should not surprise us. What is more surprising, and more disappointing, is that inaccurate claims and charges made by members of the political class go uncorrected by those who have some occupational responsibility to correct them, namely, members of the media and academic communities.

Increasingly, the media have abandoned their informational role in favor of an entertainment role. If colorful claims have news value, well then, why worry about their truth value? Don’t let facts get in the way of a good story line. As for those of us in academia, we roll our eyes at the television, shake our heads while reading the newspapers, and lecture our students on the fallacies reported in the media, but few of us go beyond that. Mostly we talk to and write for each other.

In the past few years there have been increasing indications (see chapter 1) that high-level political actors are beginning to believe in the distorted picture of American politics that they have helped to paint. This development threatens to make the distorted picture a self-fulfilling prophecy as a polarized political class abandons any effort to reach out toward the great middle of the country. That threat has motivated this ivory tower academic to attempt to provide his fellow citizens with a picture of American politics that is very different from the one they see portrayed on their televisions and described in their newspapers and magazines, a picture I think they will recognize as a more accurate reflection of their social surroundings.

My thanks to the Hoover Institution and Stanford University for the financial support that made this book possible. In particular, their support enabled me to engage two able, hard-working collaborators, Samuel Abrams and Jeremy Pope, who compiled and organized data, questioned my arguments and conclusions, and clarified the presentation. Thanks also to seminar participants at Harvard University, Northwestern University, and Stanford University for their helpful comments and suggestions about the analyses reported in these pages. Joshua Dunn, The College of William & Mary; Clyde Wilcox, Georgetown University; Jack Citrin, University of California, Berkeley; Kent Jennings, University of California, Santa Barbara; and David Edwards, University of Texas reviewed the manuscript and provided useful comments. Sam Popkin offered valuable suggestions for making the argument clearer, and as always, Bonnie Honig urged me to give more thought to broader issues.

MORRIS P. FIORINA

A member of that tiny elite that comments publicly about political currents (probably some fraction of 1% of a population) spends most of his time in informal communication about politics with others in the same select group. He rarely encounters a conversation in which his assumptions of shared contextual grasp of political ideas are challenged. . . . It is largely from his informal communications that he learns how "public opinion" is changing and what the change signifies, and he generalizes facilely from these observations to the bulk of the broader public.

Philip Converse, "The Nature of Belief Systems in Mass Publics," in *Ideology and Discontent*, ed. David Apter (New York: Free Press, 1964): 206–261

Contents

Preface

page ix



CHAPTER 1 Culture War?

page 1



CHAPTER 2 A 50:50 Nation? The Red and the Blue States

page 7



CHAPTER 3 A 50:50 Nation? Beyond the Red and the Blue States

page 22



CHAPTER 4 A Closer Look at Abortion

page 34



CHAPTER 5 A Closer Look at Homosexuality

page 55



CHAPTER 6 Have Electoral Cleavages Shifted?

page 65



CHAPTER 7 Reconciling Micro and Macro

page 77



CHAPTER 8 How Did It Come to This and Where Do We Go from Here?

page 92



Index

page 115

CHAPTER I



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 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

* 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.

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.

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, 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 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

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.

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.

⁸ "On His High Horse," *Economist*, November 9, 2002: 25.

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, "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

⁹ John Kenneth White, *The Values Divide* (New Jersey: Chatham House, 2003): 171.

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.

the contrary, the belief in a fractured nation continues to be expressed even by high-level political operatives:

*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 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

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.

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.

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 politicians 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 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 citizenry 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 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

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.

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.

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

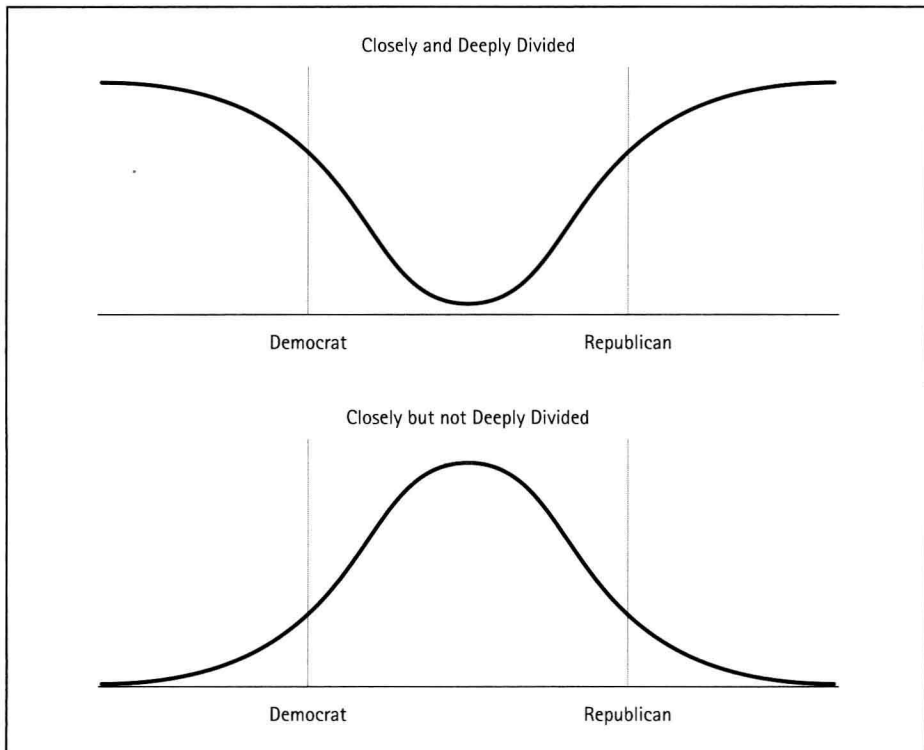
In one of the claims quoted in the preceding chapter a writer for the *Economist* refers to “the 50:50 nation.” During the late 1990s and early 2000s this phrase began to appear in popular discussions of American politics, as did a similar phrase, “the 49 percent nation.”¹ Such phraseology referred to 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
• 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.

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.

FIGURE 2.1
Two Very Different Close Election Scenarios



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 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 cen-

ter 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.

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

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

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.

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

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>.

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.