



**HOW GEOGRAPHY
AND ELECTORAL RULES
POLARIZE AMERICAN POLITICS**

DAVID A. HOPKINS

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Red Fighting Blue

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Polarize American Politics*

DAVID A. HOPKINS

Boston College



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Red Fighting Blue

The national electoral map has split into warring regional bastions of Republican red and Democratic blue, producing a deep and enduring partisan divide in American politics. In *Red Fighting Blue*, David A. Hopkins places the current partisan and electoral era in historical context, explains how the increased salience of social issues since the 1980s has redefined the parties' geographic bases of support, and reveals the critical role that American political institutions play in intermediating between the behavior of citizens and the outcome of public policy-making. The widening geographic gap in voters' partisan preferences, as magnified further by winner-takes-all electoral rules, has rendered most of the nation safe territory for either Democratic or Republican candidates in both presidential and congressional elections - with significant consequences for party competition, candidate strategy, and the operation of government.

David A. Hopkins is Associate Professor of Political Science at Boston College. He is coauthor of *Asymmetric Politics: Ideological Republicans and Group Interest Democrats* (with Matt Grossmann) and *Presidential Elections: Strategies and Structures of American Politics*, 14th edition (with Nelson W. Polsby, Aaron Wildavsky, and Steven E. Schier). His research has been the subject of a feature by Ezra Klein of Vox.com and cited by a number of other prominent journalists and analysts of American politics.

For Monica

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I

A Nation Votes, Ohio Decides

BATTLE IN THE BUCKEYE STATE

According to a formerly well-established American political tradition, the Labor Day holiday once marked the “official” beginning of the campaign season in every presidential election year. Candidates enjoyed the now-unthinkable luxury of departing the campaign trail for a few weeks after the summer nominating conventions in order to conserve their energy and make strategic preparations for the two-month national sprint that awaited them in the fall, habitually reappearing in public view on the first Monday in September. Like many other bygone campaign rituals, this practice has been rendered obsolete by technological change, reforms to the presidential nomination process (which now produces *de facto* party nominees by the preceding spring, well in advance of their formal selection at the conventions), and a progressively intensifying tactical arms race that has encouraged candidates to spare no opportunity to court and mobilize popular support. While presidential aspirants no longer wait until Labor Day to begin hunting for votes, however, they still find a way to commemorate the holiday by planning campaign activities intended to convince the electorate of their unshakable devotion to the interests and concerns of hardworking Americans.

The 2016 election was no exception. Democratic presidential nominee Hillary Clinton observed Labor Day by attending an outdoor festival in the company of several national leaders of the labor movement, including Richard Trumka of the AFL-CIO and Randi Weingarten of the American Federation of Teachers. Her Republican opponent Donald Trump hosted a roundtable discussion with union members before making an afternoon

appearance at a county fair, stopping en route to greet lunchtime customers at a local diner. The most newsworthy aspect of the day was that Clinton and Trump had found themselves in close mutual proximity among the environs of northeastern Ohio; as press photographers snapped pictures, the two candidates' logo-emblazoned airplanes even sat in clear view of each other on the tarmac of Cleveland Hopkins International Airport. In a nation of more than 300 million people spread over nearly 3.8 million square miles, the two prospective presidents had found themselves in the very same place at the very same time.¹

While the simultaneous timing of the candidates' Labor Day visits to Cleveland was coincidental rather than coordinated, it was hardly surprising that Trump and Clinton both independently chose to spend the holiday personally seeking the votes of Ohioans rather than Texans, Alaskans, or New Yorkers. The strategy pursued by presidential campaigns predictably reflects the incentives presented to candidates by the electoral system itself. Presidents are chosen not by a simple national popular vote but rather by a majority of the electoral college, whose members are selected via a set of 51 simultaneous elections held in each state and the District of Columbia. In every state but two, a slate of electors pledged to a specific party's presidential nominee is elected in a winner-take-all fashion by a statewide plurality vote (Maine and Nebraska instead award two electoral votes apiece to the state-level winner and one electoral vote to the winner of each congressional district within the state). Candidates therefore direct their attention to the residents of states, especially populous states such as Ohio, where they believe either side has a chance of placing first in the statewide popular vote – and thus of receiving the state's entire cache of presidential electors – while virtually ignoring the rest of the nation.

The electoral college has existed since the ratification of the Constitution more than 225 years ago, while the selection of electors pledged to candidates via winner-take-all popular vote has been the procedural norm among states since the 1830s. But the influence of these structural features on the behavior of candidates and the outcomes of national elections has perhaps never been greater than it is today. Electoral rules may remain formally stable over decades or even centuries of history and yet vary considerably in practical importance from one period to the next

¹ David Jackson, "Trump, Clinton Launch Fall Campaigns on Same Ohio Tarmac," *USA Today*, September 5, 2016, www.usatoday.com/story/news/politics/elections/2016/2016/09/05/donald-trump-labor-day-cleveland-hillary-clinton-ohio/89879896/.