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Purple America

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Abstract

The red state/blue state maps from recent elections seem to portray a deeply divided nation. However, three books published in 2005 provide an enormous amount of evidence of purple America: Most Americans share key values, traditional values are widely shared and stable over time, and many Americans have similar or compatible attitudes about a wide range of issues, including the moral hot-button issues of abortion and homosexuality. The popular image of a polarized America is a myth. Politics, however, is divided into red and blue. Republicans and Democrats have become more polarized over time—and estranged from a largely moderate electorate. A challenge to democracy is how to bring red/blue politics into alignment with purple America.

Purple America

The red state/blue state maps from the 2000 and 2004 presidential elections seem to portray a deeply divided nation—a visual metaphor of a country engaged in a culture war over moral values and America’s future. This widespread perception of a divided nation is not new. Opinion polls taken during the past decade reveal that most Americans have felt for years that the nation is deeply divided when it comes to the most important issues and values. These polls also show that most Americans perceive a loss of traditional values over time, the declining significance of religion on American life, and a weak sense of morality among today’s youth compared to American youth in the past.¹ The reality is surprisingly different.

Three books published in 2005 add a mountain of new evidence to an existing base of empirical work, all of which leads to one inescapable conclusion: the popular image of a polarized America is a myth. As I describe below, this evidence indicates a largely united nation: Americans show unity in key values, the nation’s traditional values have not been lost, most Americans have similar or compatible attitudes about a wide range of social issues—including hot-button issues such as abortion and homosexuality—and most American teens today have strong religious values. In short, America is not divided into red and blue. America is purple.

These findings remind us that a nation is held together by shared values, norms, and meanings, not just networks of social connections as scholars of social capital and democracy have emphasized.² These scholars often cite Tocqueville’s observation about the key role of voluntary associations in American civic life. These social connections are vital to democracy, and I do not mean to diminish their importance, but Tocqueville

also argued that “mores” are “one of the great general causes responsible for the maintenance of a democratic republic in the United States.” He defined mores broadly “to apply not only to ‘*moeurs*’ in the strict sense, which might be called habits of the heart, but also to the different notions possessed by men, the various opinions current among them, and the sum of ideas that shape mental habits.” In short, he says, mores include the “whole moral and intellectual state of a people.”³ American’s social connections may be unraveling—more and more Americans may be “bowling alone,” to use Robert Putnam’s famous metaphor—but it is possible that “mores” compensate and hold the nation together. Perhaps social integration via networks is less and less viable in an increasingly diverse population. Instead, the glue that keeps the nation together increasingly may be cultural—the values, norms, and meanings that most Americans already have in common.

Evidence of Purple America

Morris Fiorina and colleagues take a close look at a wide range of political, social, and economic attitudes, using data from a variety of sources, such as the General Social Surveys, National Election Studies, Gallup, and Pew.⁴ They compare Americans living in red and blue states in 2000, and also look at trends over the past 30 years. An update of this book, comparing red/blue states in 2004, yields the same results.⁵ The evidence shows that the attitudes of people living in red and blue states are remarkably similar. For example, 18 percent of those in red states and 22 percent of those in blue identify as liberal; 41 percent in red states and 33 percent in blue states identify as conservative. In both red and blue states, 14 percent favored using the budget surplus in 2000 to cut taxes.

Majorities of residents of both red and blue states regard Evangelical Christians favorably (63 percent and 60 percent, respectively). About three-quarters of residents of both red states (77 percent) and blue states (70 percent) favor the death penalty. Very large majorities support gender equality, 82 percent for red states and 83 percent for blue states. Sixty-two percent of residents of red states and of blue states believe that one should tolerate others' moral views. The list of similarities goes on.

Looking at trends for a host of attitudes—about race, crime, gender, sexuality, gun control, poverty, and others—reveals that Americans' opinions are actually *converging* over time. The moral litmus tests in the presumed culture war are attitudes about abortion and homosexuality. Even here, Americans agree more than they disagree. For example, many Americans feel abortion is wrong, but very large majorities of Americans are pro-choice if there is a strong chance of serious a birth defect, the woman's health is seriously endangered, or the pregnancy is the result of rape. Support for pro-choice falls if the reason is that a woman does not want more children, can't afford more children, or because the woman is unmarried. All of these attitudes about abortion have been stable over the last 30 years and do not differ much by geographic region, gender, religious affiliation, or political party identification.

As with abortion, the majority of Americans feel homosexuality is wrong, but few want to criminalize it. And, over time, Americans show declining hostility toward homosexuals, and increasingly liberal attitudes. For example, support for the equal rights of homosexuals in employment has risen steadily over the past 25 years to about 80 percent today. The attitudes of Democrats and Republican about the legalization of homosexuality do not differ much. Many Americans also agree on where to draw the

line: proposals to ban same-sex marriage were included on eleven 2004 state ballots; each was approved, all but Oregon's by wide margins. Kansas approved a constitutional ban on gay marriage, bringing the total to 18 states that legally forbid same-sex marriages.

Based on the evidence, Fiorina's conclusion is unambiguous: "Reports of a culture war are mostly wishful thinking and useful fund-raising strategies on the part of culture war guerrillas, abetted by a media driven by the need to make the dull and everyday appear exciting and unprecedented."⁶

While Fiorina focuses on attitudes, I evaluate America's values, using data from all four waves of the World Values Surveys, the largest systematic attempt ever made to document values, attitudes, and beliefs around the world.⁷ These unique data make it possible to compare the U.S. with over 70 nations around the world, to examine the distribution of values in America, and to consider trends in America's values over time. Values are the principles we use to guide human action, to make choices, to explain and justify behaviors, and to judge and to be judged. If there is a culture war, Americans should be divided into two opposed moral camps: those with traditional values versus those with secular values. Not so. Most Americans share traditional values—a constellation of values about God, country, and family—and these values have been stable for decades. For example, very large majorities of Americans believe in God (96 percent), the soul (96 percent), heaven (86 percent), and life after death (81 percent). When asked to rate how important God is in their lives on a 10-point scale, 58 percent say "10"—the highest rating. Eighty-five percent of Americans give ratings of 7, 8, 9, or 10. Almost 90 percent of Americans say they pray, with 78 percent praying weekly or

more often. A large majority find comfort in religion (80 percent), with 60 percent attending religious services once a month or more often.

Consistent with traditional values, Americans are very patriotic—96 percent are proud to be American. And, Americans are very pro-family, especially the “traditional” model of a nuclear family. The beliefs that abortion and gay marriage are wrong (noted above) imply these underlying values. Over three-quarters say that children should always love and respect their parents, regardless of their parents’ qualities and faults. Almost everyone (94 percent) says that more emphasis on family life would be a good thing.

Just how unusual America’s values are becomes clear when compared to the values of other economically developed, democratic societies. For example, Belgium, Denmark, Great Britain, Sweden, France, Netherlands, Norway, Finland, Switzerland, Germany, and many others—have lost their traditional values over time and are now largely secular societies. Ireland is the only developed society that is more traditional than the United States. America’s peers on the traditional/secular values dimension—nations that are located at about the same position—include Poland, Romania, India, Vietnam, and Turkey. Religiosity is so high in America that it appears to have more in common with poor and developing nations than it does with rich democracies. With the exception of Ireland, only poor and often non-democratic societies are more religious than the United States, such as Nigeria, Uganda, Philippines, Bangladesh, Egypt, Jordan, Zimbabwe, and Mexico.⁸

What about America’s youth? The evidence covered in Fiorina’s book and my own are based on polls of adults age 18 and older. Even if American adults have similar

attitudes and values, it is possible that American adolescents are largely secular or have religious and spiritual values that diverge from the adult population. Indeed, most American adults believe so. For example, in a Pew poll conducted in March 2002, three of four said “no” in response to the question, “Do you think that young people today have as strong a sense of right and wrong as they did, say, fifty years ago?”⁹ The reality is quite different, according to the National Study of Youth and Religion, the first-ever national survey of the religious and spiritual lives of American teenagers (ages 13 – 17). Contrary to popular stereotypes, Christian Smith and Melinda Lundquist Denton report that religion is a significant factor in the lives of America’s youth, that the beliefs and practices of teenagers are quite conventional, and that the religious values of teenagers are strongly influenced by their parents.¹⁰

The religious affiliations of American teenagers reflect the adult population. For example, three of four adolescents report Protestant (52 percent) or Catholic (23 percent) as their religious affiliation. Seventy-eight percent say their religious beliefs are similar to their mother’s and 72 percent say their beliefs are similar to their father’s. Like the adult population, just over half say they attend religious services 2 – 3 times a month or more often. Forty-five percent attend with both parents and 21 percent attend with one. Prayer is important to teenagers. The majority of teens pray alone, with 38 percent praying alone once a day or more often, and 27 percent praying alone once or a few times a week.

Eighty-four percent of American adolescents believe in God, and 65 percent view God as a personal being involved in the lives of people today. Almost two-thirds (71 percent) believe in a judgment day when God will reward some and punish others. Most

adolescents definitely believe in the existence of angels (63 percent) and in divine miracles from God (61 percent), but few definitely believe in such paranormal beliefs as astrology (9 percent), communicating with the dead (9 percent), or psychics and fortune tellers (6 percent). Fifty-one percent of American teenagers say that religious faith is extremely or very important in shaping their daily lives

These three books about attitudes, values, and beliefs provide ample evidence of purple America. Using different data and written from different disciplinary perspectives, all reach the same conclusion: Americans are not polarized. Americans share similar attitudes about a wide range of social issues. They are largely united when it comes to key values. Politics, however, is a different story.

Red/Blue Politics and the Real Divide

Polarization has taken place in one highly visible arena: politics. Recent examples include polarized (and polarizing) debates about government intervention in the Terry Schiavo case and the “nuclear option” to alter U.S. Senate rules and disallow the use of filibusters to delay judicial nominations. The same research that documents the lack of polarization (and even convergence) among the American people also finds that political elites and party activists (the “political class”) have become more polarized over time. Elites and activists are the small percentage of the American people who hold office, run for office, head up interest groups, eagerly consume political news, participate actively in political events and campaigns, and so on—in short, a small number of atypical Americans.

The real divide in America is between the political class and the American people. Increasing polarization among elites and activists estranges them from a largely united electorate. For example, four of five Americans opposed federal intervention in the Schiavo case, and two-thirds of Americans opposed the “nuclear option.”¹¹ Most Americans consider themselves to be middle-of-the-road politically, but perceive the Republican Party to be much farther to the right and the Democratic Party to be much farther to the left. Visible polarization in politics and estrangement from the electorate contribute to the perception of a red/blue divide, even though Americans themselves are purple.

If we dig deeper, we find that red/blue politics are related to America’s unique value system, one that has emerged over the last twenty years. America’s traditional values have remained stable, as noted above, but other values have changed along a continuum of survival versus self-expression values.¹² Self-expression values emphasize the quality of life (over consumption and pleasure), spiritual pursuits, tolerance of others and appreciation of diversity (human rights, civil rights, gay rights, and gender equality), political activism, and concerns about the environment. Survival values emphasize physical safety and security, economic growth, and domestic order above all else. Generally, these values exist in poor societies or in those that have experienced economic collapse or political turmoil, such as African nations, South Asian nations, and many ex-communist nations (where life expectancy actually has gone down). Once material needs are satisfied and survival is taken for granted, however, self-expression values begin to emerge.¹³

Americans have moved rapidly over time toward self-expression values (as have the peoples of most economically developed democracies). But because Americans also retain their traditional values, the trend toward self-expression values has created a unique “mixed” values system. No other nation on the face of the earth is as traditional *and* as self-expression oriented as the United States. In contrast, most affluent democracies have secular values coupled with self-expression values. Poor societies tend to have traditional values and survival values.

Traditional values and self-expression values provide conflicting principles and contrary guides to conduct. The principle underlying traditional values is obedience to an absolute, external, transcendental authority—God and country. But the principle underlying self-expression values is obedience to a relative, internal authority—the self. These two principles lead people in contrary directions and create moral dilemmas and paradoxes. For example, many Americans believe abortion is morally wrong, even murder (traditional values), and yet they also believe people should make their own choices about abortion (self-expression values).

Most individual Americans have internalized traditional values and self-expression values. America’s teens have the same combination. For example, most teenagers profess and practice strong religious beliefs (traditional values) and also believe that people should be free to make their own choices and express their beliefs in their own ways (self-expression values).¹⁴ As a result, American adults and teens wrestle with contrary principles and guides to conduct.

The personal experience of conflicting principles creates what psychologists call cognitive dissonance: an unpleasant feeling of distress or disequilibrium caused by a

discrepancy between two beliefs. For Americans, having traditional values and self-expression values at the same time produces cognitive dissonance—a personal experience of a crisis of values. This experience of a crisis has been escalating over time because Americans are becoming more and more self-expression oriented as they hold onto stable traditional values. The tension between traditional and self-expression values is one reason that Americans are more likely than most people to report that they often think about the meaning and purpose of life—an attempt at an individual-level synthesis of conflicting principles.¹⁵

Red/blue politics are driven by a different (and less healthy) approach to handling the moral paradoxes caused by conflicting principles: group polarization. Instead of attempting to rise above and integrate America's mixed values system, Republicans and Democrats split it apart, each side embodying one principle and projecting the other “undesirable” principle onto the other side. The Republican platform is based on traditional values and neglects or even abridges self-expression values. The Democratic platform is based on self-expression values and ignores America's traditional values. Indeed, Democrats have all but ceded the conversation about “values” to the Republicans. This splitting-projecting dynamic escalates intergroup conflict and hostility to the point where each side views the other as its moral adversary; each behaves self-righteously, seeing itself as good and the other as un-American, and compromise becomes virtually unthinkable. This approach to handling moral paradoxes amplified the conflict between the North and South, escalating until it erupted in the American Civil War. Today, the dynamics of group polarization animate and amplify red/blue politics, converting every

issue into a dramatic morality play of good versus evil, where it seems like nothing less than the American way of life is at stake.

A Challenge to Democracy

Red/blue politics and the dynamics of group polarization mean that Democrats and Republicans are equally out of touch with the American people. Splitting America's mixed values system forces Americans to make uncomfortable choices between traditional values and self-expression values. Recent elections show that, forced to make a choice, Americans will vote their traditional values. This result does not mean that most Americans prefer the conservative political platform associated with traditional values. Rather, it underscores the importance of "values" in American life and the extent to which shared values or what Toqueville called "mores" are the cultural bonds that make Americans feel connected to one another.

Traditional values without self-expression values breed intolerance and spawn moral crusades at home and abroad. Self-expression values without traditional values lack a solid foundation, emotional energy, and a sense of national identity (and do not win elections). Individual Americans are able to rise above the contradictions of a mixed values system. Political elites and activists also need to embrace the paradox of traditional values and self-expression values and find a workable synthesis. The dynamic interplay of traditional values and self-expression values can be a source of positive energy, innovation, and progress. The evidence of purple America shows that there is a lot of common ground among the American people on which an integration of values can be built. The challenge to democracy is find a synthesis of traditional and self-

expression values that works in the political sphere, so that a new purple politics arises to match purple America.

¹ These poll results are reported in chapter 1, Wayne Baker, *America's Crisis of Values: Reality and Perception* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005).

² Such as Robert D. Putnam's *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community* (NY: Simon and Schuster, 2000); *Making Democracy Work: Civic Traditions in Italy* (Princeton University Press 1993); "Bowling Alone" America's Declining Social Capital." *Journal of Democracy* 6: 65-78 (1995). Amitai Etzioni argues that Putnam examines only one side of community—community as social bonds. Etzioni argues that the other side of community is a set of shared values, norms, and meanings. See his "Is Bowling Together Sociologically Lite?" *Contemporary Sociology* 30:223-224 (2001). Jürgen Habermas makes a similar argument in his *The Inclusion of the Other*, edited by Ciaran Cronin and Pablo De Grieff. (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1998). National identity or "the consciousness of belonging to 'the same' people" (p. 113) is the cultural basis of the modern constitutional state.

³ Page 287, Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, translated by George Lawrence and edited by J. P. Mayer (NY: HarperPerennial 1988).

⁴ Morris Fiorina, with Samuel J. Abrams and Jeremy C. Pope, *Culture War? The Myth of a Polarized America* (NY: Pearson Longman, 2005).

⁵ Morris Fiorina, "Culture War? A 2004 Update," Miller-Converse Lecture, Institute for Social Research, University of Michigan, April 28, 2005.

⁶ Fiorina, Abrams, and Pope, op. cit., page 33.

⁷ Baker, op. cit.

⁸ See, for example, see 75 nations ranked according to a strength of religiosity scale, page 54, Ronald Inglehart and Pippa Norris, *Rising Tide: Gender Equality and Cultural Change Around the World*. (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2003).

⁹ Poll results are reported in chapter 1, Baker, op. cit.

¹⁰ Christian Smith with Melinda Lundquist Denton, *Soul Searching: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of American Teenagers* (NY: Oxford University Press 2005).

¹¹ The poll figures about the Terry Shiavo case come from a CBS News Poll (March 2005); those about the “nuclear option” come from a Washington Post/ABC poll (April 2005).

¹² Extensive cross-cultural research using data from the World Values Surveys reveal two fundamental dimensions: traditional versus secular values, and survival versus self-expression values. Both are scales that emerge from a factor analysis of many survey items. See Baker, op. cit., for details.

¹³ These values include what Nobel laureate Robert Fogel calls “the struggle for self-realization, the desire to find a deeper meaning in life than the endless accumulation of consumer durables and the pursuit of pleasure, access to the miracles of modern medicine, education not only for careers but for spiritual values, methods of financing an early, fruitful, and long-lasting retirement, and increasing the amount of quality time available for family activities.” Robert William Fogel, *The Fourth Great Awakening and the Future of Egalitarianism*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press (2000), pp. 176-177.

¹⁴ Note that Smith and Denton, *op. cit.*, do not use the label “self-expression values.”

However, a close reading of their text shows that it fits the facts.

¹⁵ Baker, *op. cit.*, chapter 5.

Purple America is the belief that a more detailed analysis of the voting results of recent United States national elections reveals that the U.S. electorate is not as polarized between "Red" America (Republican) and "Blue" America (Democratic) as is often depicted in news analysis.^{[1][2]} The term reflects the fact that news organizations generally use the colors red and blue. Robert Vanderbei at Princeton University made the first Purple America map after the 2000 presidential election.