

## *Culture War ?*

James Hunter's book, *Culture Wars*, was embraced by journalists in 1991. Hunter argued conflict was inevitable in a nation culturally divided, and since then terms like "polarized" and "red and blue states" have become household terms. The 2000 election seems to strengthen Hunter's argument, however Fiorina brings up another point; Americans agree on most issues, and the idea of a culture war inaccurately persists for several reasons.

The media is most Americans' source of information on national issues and election predictions and also what they remember the most. However the media sometimes selects data that will show a desired outcome, instead of letting the facts speak for themselves (21). The media may also unintentionally make false predictions. Most polls taken before elections include all citizens, not simply those who vote. There may be a distinct difference between the opinions of those who vote and the entire electorate as a whole (14). The media also often speaks of "red states and blue states" but never mentions that there are many "gray states," those with less than a 55% Democrat or Republican majority (9). The idea of a culture "war" is a better story for the media than the truth; that most Americans are ideologically similar.

Data shows that most citizens have very similar opinions on almost every issue. Although most presidential elections since 1988 were close, these elections reflect mainly extremist voters. Those who are indifferent often do not vote, or are swayed by extremists (2). Since the realignment of the South, those who identify with a party also identify with its ideology; there are far fewer liberal Republicans and conservative Democrats today (25). Fiorina argues that ordinary citizens are not becoming more polarized, but rather activists, extremists, and politicians are moving farther from the center (78). Voters are forced to choose between extreme candidates (33) often choosing whoever has deviated least from popular opinion (79). Moderate

candidates are more rarely making the ballot because the parties who nominate them want to be sure their ideology will be reflected. Leaders of interest groups who used to give money to campaigns are now trying to gain office, resulting in officials who are deeply rooted in their beliefs (79). Furthermore, today's government structure allows issue activists and extremist voters to get more involved than in the past. Since the government is now more involved with things like smoking bans and environmental regulations, formerly thought to be the realm of private life, activists have more opportunities to engage (95). Many local government meetings are public, even giving citizens a chance to voice their opinion (96). Activists are less willing to compromise on issues, they see their position as right, and any other as unacceptable (102). This extreme rhetoric and behavior is portrayed by the media and remembered by American citizens. The problem is that people who care enough to participate on government "care deeply and tend to have extreme views on the issues they care deeply about" (99). Moderates do not push their views on others. Oftentimes the issues that motivate extremists are not defense, or health care, or things that affect everyday life, but rather religious or moral issues affecting a minority of the public (101). This results in citizens being disconnected from their elected officials and the false portrayal of a culture war.

There is also no evidence that Americans identify with a party based only on moral issues and not economics (71). There is evidence however, that Americans are converging on almost every issue. Question wording and poll results reported by the media, again, may falsely show otherwise, especially when paired with interviews of extremists. While very few Americans support abortion, almost 2/3 of the population agrees with *Roe v. Wade* and a woman's right to choose (37). Most Americans would favor compromise on abortion and other issues, rejecting extreme decisions; such as making abortion legal or illegal under any circumstances (45).

Similarly, while most Americans don't support gays, they refuse to make homosexual relationships illegal (58) and would be happy with civil unions as a compromise (64). The gender gap, though commonly thought to, has more to do with use of force and protecting those who are vulnerable than abortion (48). The only reason the gender gap may be increasing on some issues is because marriage rate are down (51). However, in general, views between the old and young, men and women, wealthy and middle class, and among different religions, are all converging toward the center, toward compromise. It is the elected officials who are trying to steer citizens toward the left and right.